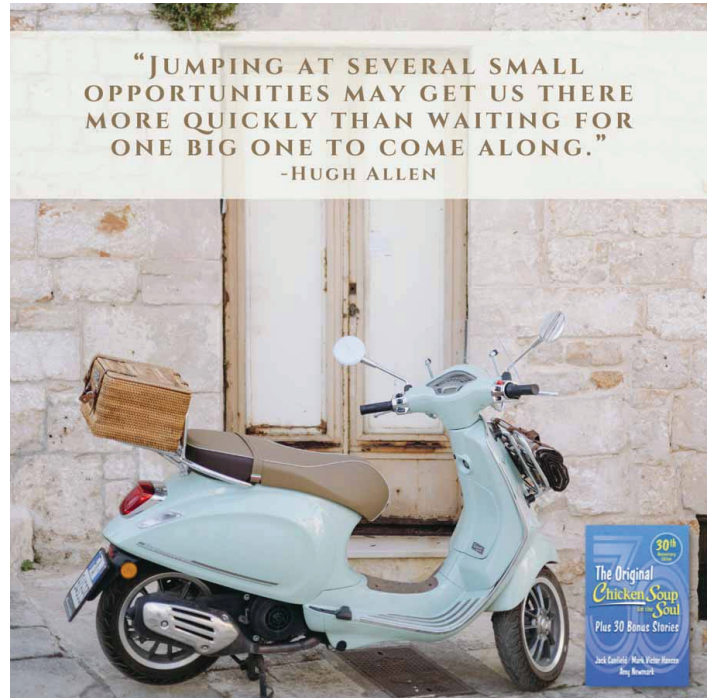


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## Monday, Aug. 14

Senior Menu: Chicken rice casserole, mixed vegetables, chocolate pudding with banana, whole wheat bread.

Boys Golf at Sioux Valley (Volga), 10 a.m.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

The Pantry at Groton Community Center, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Senior Citizens meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

## Tuesday, Aug. 15

Senior Menu: Baked pork chops, creamy noodles, California blend, apple sauce, whole wheat bread.

Girls Soccer hosts Garretson, 6 p.m.

The Pantry at Groton Community Center, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 209 N Main, open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde Ad Council

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

## Saturday, Aug. 12

**Postponed:** Girls Soccer hosts Dakota Valley: Varsity at 1 p.m., JV at 2:30 p.m.

Boys Soccer at Freeman Academy, 1 p.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 209 N Main, open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

## Sunday, Aug. 13

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

**Groton Daily Independent**  
**PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445**  
**Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460**

**OPEN:** **Recycling Trailer in Groton**  
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.  
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## The Bulletin by Newsweek

### World in Brief

within those materials.

U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland has appointed U.S. Attorney David Weiss to serve as special counsel in the ongoing investigation into President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden.

FTX co-founder Sam Bankman-Fried's bail has been revoked after a judge said there is evidence of attempted witness tampering in his fraud case. Bankman-Fried has been under house arrest while awaiting the start of his trial.

The assault weapons ban signed into law after the mass shooting at Highland Park's 2022 July 4th parade is constitutional, the Illinois Supreme Court has ruled.

Members of ECOWAS, the bloc of West African nations, have approved armed intervention in Niger "as soon as possible" to reinstate ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara said.

The United Nations has confirmed that five of its staff members who were kidnapped in Yemen 18 months ago have been released and are in good health.

At least 49,449 people died to suicide in the U.S. in 2022, the highest number reported since records began, according to new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Ukrainian President Zelensky has dismissed all heads of Ukraine's regional military committees amid a sprawling probe into corruption related to armed forces recruitment. Meanwhile, Ukrainian officials reportedly don't expect their pilots to be fully trained to fly U.S.-made F-16s until the summer of 2024, according to The Washington Post.

### TALKING POINTS

"The closest thing I can compare it to is, perhaps, a war zone, or maybe a bomb went off. It was cars in the street, doors open, melted to the ground. Most structures no longer exist for blocks and blocks of this," Maui Mayor Richard Bissen told Good Morning America after viewing the destruction in Lahaina caused by this week's wildfires on Maui.

"The suffering people in the trenches of a divided country really need only surrender, which would perhaps open the way to peace. But neither Washington nor Kyiv wants peace. America wants undivided power and for the sake of it does not spare the bloody Ukrainian fat," former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, an ally to Russian President Vladimir Putin, wrote on Telegram.

### WHAT TO WATCH IN THE DAY AHEAD

The FIFA Women's World Cup quarter-finals continue in Australia. France will play Australia in a match scheduled to begin at 3 a.m. ET on Saturday, and England will take on Colombia a few hours later with a match at 6:30 a.m. ET.

The Library of Congress is hosting its National Book Festival on Saturday in Washington, D.C. The event kicks off at 9 a.m. ET at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, with some programs expected to stream online.

Donald Trump will be traveling to the Iowa State Fair taking place on Saturday in Des Moines. The former president is expected to arrive in the early afternoon.

This year's Perseid meteor shower is expected to be at its most visible Saturday night and early Sunday morning.

At least 80 people have died from Hawaii's wildfires. Lahaina residents are regaining access to the area, though Gov. Josh Green warns it remains a "devastated zone." A daily 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew will be enforced in Lahaina as the recovery process begins.

Judge Tanya Chutkan has issued a protective order in former President Donald Trump's election conspiracy case. The order covers sensitive material provided to his defense team, including interviews with potential witnesses, and blocks Trump from publicly sharing information contained

## Thune Slams Biden's Outrageous Guidance on School Hunting, Archery Programs

"By including hunter education in schools, students are given the tools to be safe and responsible hunters."  
WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) today called on the Biden administration to withdraw its outrageous plan to block funding for elementary and secondary schools that have hunting and archery programs. The letter condemns the administration's misinterpretation of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act and its attempt to justify blocking funds for schools with certain outdoor recreation programs.

"While the administration claims to be eliminating dangerous activities, this guidance will, in fact, have the opposite effect," the senators wrote. "These programs provided thousands of students with the opportunity to learn proper instruction for firearm and archery safety. By including hunter education in schools, students are given the tools to be safe and responsible hunters. It is now clearer than ever that the Biden Administration will use the bill to attack the constitutional rights of Americans."

The letter was led by U.S. Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.) and, in addition to Thune, was also signed by U.S. Sens. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.), Mike Braun (R-Ind.), Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), Ted Cruz (R-Texas), Steve Daines (R-Mont.), Deb Fischer (R-Neb.), Josh Hawley (R-Mo.), Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.), John Kennedy (R-La.), Mike Lee (R-Utah), Cynthia Lummis (R-Wyo.), Roger Marshall (R-Kan.), Rand Paul (R-Ky.), Jim Risch (R-Idaho), Rick Scott (R-Fla.), Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska), and Roger Wicker (R-Miss.).

According to the National Archery in the Schools Program, 1.3 million students across 9,000 schools are enrolled in archery courses, and more than 500,000 students participate and are certified through hunter education courses each year.

Full letter below:

Dear President Biden,

We write to express our deep concern about the Biden Administration's attempt to use the gun control bill passed last year to block funding for elementary and secondary schools. In April, the U.S. Department of Education provided a guidance prohibiting Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) funds for hunter education and archery programs. Since the guidance was issued, there have been reports of schools canceling plans to include archery or hunting education in their curriculum. We write to urge the administration to immediately reverse this misguided decision and ensure funding for these vital programs is not withheld.

While the administration claims to be eliminating dangerous activities, this guidance will, in fact, have the opposite effect. These programs provided thousands of students with the opportunity to learn proper instruction for firearm and archery safety. Over 500,000 students participate and are certified through hunter education courses each year. Learning to safely handle firearms results in a decrease in firearm-related injuries and accidents. In fact, hunter education programs have decreased hunting accidents by over 50% since the program's development over 50 years ago. By including hunter education in schools, students are given the tools to be safe and responsible hunters.

We voted against the gun control legislation. It is now clearer than ever that the Biden Administration will use the bill to attack the constitutional rights of Americans. Hunting and archery are strongly connected to the traditions and heritage of America. This outrageous overreach is an attack on hunters and outdoor recreation that must be addressed.

The Biden administration's purposeful misinterpretation of the gun control bill is attempting to take away valuable programs from students across the country. Hunter education and archery programs are beneficial to students both in rural and urban areas. We call on the Biden Administration to immediately withdraw the guidance and support these essential programs.

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## Highway Patrol Sturgis Rally Daily Information

Compiled from 6 a.m. Saturday August 5,  
2023, to 6 a.m. Friday August 11, 2023  
Fatal Crashes: None to report.

### Injury Crashes:

At 6:51am, Thursday, US Highway 85, mile marker 12: A 2018 BMW K1600 was southbound and struck a deer in the roadway. The driver was wearing helmet and received serious non-life-threatening injuries.

At 8:30am, Thursday, US Highway 85, mile marker 1: A 2016 Victory motorcycle and 2021 Harley Davidson motorcycle were traveling southbound in a group. The group slowed down and the Victory rear ended the Harley Davidson. The driver of the Victory was not wearing a helmet and received serious non-life-threatening injuries. The driver of the Harley Davidson was wearing a helmet and was not injured.

At 10:33am, Thursday, South Dakota Highway 87, mile marker 50: A 2013 Harley Davidson was traveling southbound and struck an antelope. The driver and passenger were thrown from the motorcycle. The driver was not wearing a helmet and received minor injuries. The passenger was wearing a helmet and received minor injuries.

At 1:26pm, Thursday, Old Hill City Road: A 2017 Indian motorcycle was traveling eastbound, failed to negotiate a curve, and left the roadway. The

driver was not wearing a helmet and received minor injuries. The passenger was wearing a helmet and received serious non-life-threatening injuries.

At 5:01pm, Thursday, Wildlife Loop Road, mile marker 4: a 2013 Harley Davidson motorcycle was traveling westbound, failed to negotiate a curve, and left the roadway. The driver and passenger were wearing helmets. The driver received minor injuries and the passenger received serious non-life-threatening injuries.

At 5:19pm, Thursday, US Highway 14A, mile marker 47: a 2003 Yamaha motorcycle was traveling westbound and lost control. The driver became separated from the motorcycle. The driver was wearing a helmet and received minor injuries.

At 5:22pm, Thursday, US Highway 16, mile marker 57: a 2009 Suzuki motorcycle was traveling westbound. A 2020 Kia Sorento was attempting to cross westbound lanes of travel to turn eastbound on US Highway 16. The Suzuki struck the rear taillight of the Kia. The driver of the Suzuki was separated from the motorcycle. The driver of the Suzuki was wearing a helmet and received serious non-life-threatening injuries. The driver of the Kia was wearing a seatbelt and was not injured.

At 6:43pm, Thursday, Alkali Road near its intersection with 132nd Ave: a 2022 Toyota Sienna was traveling eastbound, left the roadway, struck a sign, and entered the south ditch. The driver was wearing a seatbelt and received minor injuries.###

Item	Sturgis	Rapid City District	District Total	Last Year to Date
DUI Arrests	80	14	94	114
Misd Drug Arrests	138	50	188	117
Felony Drug Arrests	112	21	133	88
Total Citations	713	429	1142	1069
Total Warnings	1967	1333	3300	3851
Cash Seized	\$2005.00	\$0.00	\$2005.00	\$4335.00
Vehicles Seized	0	0	0	4
For Drug Poss.	0	0	0	4
For Serial No.	0	0	0	0
Non-Injury Accidents	11	26	37	34
Injury Accidents	15	36	51	41
Fatal Accidents	3	0	3	3
# of Fatalities	3	0	3	3



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## SDDVA Secretary Whitlock's August Column – There is no Time Like Fair Time!

The South Dakota State Fair always promises a great time for all that attend.

Our State Fair is truly unlike any other. Where else can you inhale a huge plate of fried food while walking toward the carnival rides, or have a corn dog for your main entree and funnel cake for dessert? Where else can you get anything fried on a stick, visit a car show, tractor show, goat tying, arm wrestling, and play arcade games all within a few blocks of each other? Where else can you have the chance to meet and take photos with celebrities and political candidates? Where else can you shop, learn, and connect with old friends while tracking five miles on your walk app? The list goes on and so does the fun!

The State Fair also provides great opportunities for veterans. We may not be serving up fried pickles, cotton candy, kettle corn, or turkey legs, but we'll be manning booth 5A in the Expo Building for all five days of the Fair. Our team of experts will be prepared to answer veteran's questions on disability, compensation, healthcare, long term care, home loans, rehabilitation and education, employment and training programs, pension, and death benefits. Our booth will also be manned by veterans who had boots on the ground and continue to serve in many ways as they focus on enhancing the lives of their fellow veterans. We're just a stone's throw away from the midway. Our team will be available from 9:00 am – 8:00 pm on Thursday through Sunday and 9:00 am – 5:00 pm on Monday.

The State Fair will present a "salute to veterans" on Thursday, August 31. The day affords all veterans free gate admission and a recognition program that starts at 10:30 am.

Fairgoers are encouraged to wear "red" to "Remember Everyone Deployed" on Friday, September 1, in support of our deployed troops. Meet us at the Northwestern Energy Freedom Stage at 1:30 pm for group photo of all those donning the "red".

A trip to the state fair is a tradition families have passed on from generation to generation.

Hope to see you there! I'll be in the food court!

Greg Whitlock, Secretary  
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs



**Greg Whitlock,  
Secretary  
South Dakota  
Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

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BROWN COUNTY  
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA  
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY

August 15, 2023, 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Agenda
3. Opportunity for Public Comment
4. First Reading of Ordinances:
  - a. #251 - Rezone
  - b. #252 - Rezone
  - c. #253 - Rezone
  - d. #254 - Rezone
5. Approve & Authorize Chairman to sign MOU for 2023 Byrne Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) between City of Aberdeen and Brown County
6. Approve New Dive Team Member
7. Consent Calendar
  - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes from August 8, 2023
  - b. Claims/Payroll
  - c. HR Report
  - d. Lease Agreement
  - e. Claim Assignment
  - f. Lottery Permit – Aberdeen Area Veterans
  - g. Travel Requests
  - h. Plats for Aberdeen City Zoning regarding Tax Deed Properties
8. Other Business
9. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
10. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

**Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.**

<https://meet.goto.com/BrCoCommission>

**You can also dial in using your phone.** United States: [+1 \(872\) 240-3311](tel:+18722403311)

**Access Code:** 601-168-909 #

Get the app now and be ready when your first meeting starts: <https://meet.goto.com/install>

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission - Presentations may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board)

Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

**Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at <https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>**

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT 06-6

2023-2024 Groton Area School District Back to School Information

## **Groton Area School District 06-6 – “Mission Statement”**

Each school will foster a school climate conducive to learning by encouraging good behavior and citizenship, good attendance, a thirst for knowledge, and high academic standards. Teachers will employ strategies and approaches to instruction to meet the needs of all children assigned to them. With proper motivation and instruction, all children can learn!

## **Teacher Qualifications**

All teachers of core academic subjects must hold at least a bachelor’s degree, have full state certification, and demonstrate knowledge in the core academic subject they teach. For information regarding the qualifications of your child’s teachers, you may contact the superintendent’s office at 397-2351.

## **Registration and Schedule Changes**

Anyone new to the District should contact the respective building principal(s) as soon as possible. Middle School and High School Schedule changes can be made on Thursday, August 17, 2023 from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM.

## **Dual Credit Computer Check-Out**

Students enrolled in dual credit courses for the fall may check out their computers for the year on Wednesday, August 16, 2023 from 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM. Students must have the appropriate paperwork completed prior to being issued their device.

## **School Supply Lists**

Students’ school supply lists for the elementary school (preschool – grade 5) are posted on the District’s web site at [www.grotonarea.com](http://www.grotonarea.com) under the District Info Heading. Students in the middle school (grades 6-8) will be required to have the same color notebook, folder, and book cover for each class. Math will be green; English, blue; reading, red; science, purple; and social studies, black. The students can choose their own colors for PE, art, health, and computer classes.

## **6<sup>th</sup> Grade Welcome Walk – Monday, August 21, 2023**

Groton Area Middle School is hosting a 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Welcome Walk on Monday, August 21, 2023 from 3:30 PM to 5:30 PM. Students and their parents are invited to come get a class schedule and other important information from the school office, find the student locker and classrooms, and begin to learn the new building.

## **Tablet PCs or Ipads Issued to All Students**

Prior to being issued their tablet PC, students and their parents must sign and return the following documents: Laptop Computer Protection Agreement, the Student Pledge, E-mail Acceptable Use Agreement, the Groton Area School District Network/Internet agreement, and the Parental Consent to Publish Student Photos/Work. Required forms can be picked up in the School Office or will be sent home with students on the first day of classes.

## **First Day of School – Wednesday, August 23**

The first day of school is on Wednesday, August 23. Buses will run and school lunch will be served. Each route driver will contact parents to confirm bus arrival times. Other bus route questions may be referred to Transportation Director, Damian Bahr, at (605) 397-8117. The GRASP (OST) program at the elementary school will be available on the first day of school.

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## Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten

The District offers all-day, every day kindergarten classes. Children may enter kindergarten if they are 5 years of age on or before September 1 of the year in which they are to enter school. The District offers a junior kindergarten program each day from 12:15PM – 3:22 PM for students that are eligible to attend kindergarten, but are not quite ready for kindergarten. Students enrolling in first grade must be 6 years of age on or before September 1 of that school year.

## Non-Resident Enrollment

For out-of-district students, applications to open enroll may be accepted throughout the school year. Applications are available from any school district administrative office. All open enrollment requests and related questions should be referred to school superintendent, Joe Schwan, at (605) 397-2351.

## 2023-2024 School Hours

Groton Area Elementary	8:15 AM	Arrival Time (Supervision)
	8:21 AM – 3:22 PM	Classes in Session
Groton Area MS/HS	8:25 AM	First Bell
	8:30 AM – 3:30 PM	Classes in Session

## GRASP (OST) Program

The GRASP program services children in junior kindergarten through grade five with before and after-school homework help, supervised learning activities, and snacks. The GRASP program will be held in the Groton Area Elementary School from 7:00 AM - 8:00 AM and 3:22 PM – 6:00 PM each day that school is in session. Rates are \$3.00 per hour, per child. Any OST questions or registrations may be directed to Elementary Principal, Mr. Brett Schwan, at (605) 397-2317.

## K-12 Breakfast and Lunch Program

The Groton Area School District participates in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. Guidelines for 2023-2024 applications for free and reduced priced meals will be mailed out the week of August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Parents are encouraged to apply for free and reduced priced meals if there is a possibility they may qualify.

The school provides breakfast and lunch for all students each day school is in session. All meals are on a cash basis (i.e. pay as you go), while recognizing the provisions for free and reduced price meals. Prices are as follows:

Groton Area Elementary:

<b>Daily Breakfast</b>	\$2.50
<b>Daily Lunch</b>	\$3.25

Prices for second servings at the elementary are \$1.00.

Groton Area Middle School/High School:

<b>Daily Breakfast</b>	\$3.00
<b>Daily Lunch</b>	\$3.75

Prices for second servings at the middle/high school are \$1.25.

## Activity Tickets

Activity tickets are intended to admit all students to regularly scheduled home activities or events, with about the only exceptions being tournaments and the Pops Concert. Students in grades 1-5 may purchase an activity ticket, if they wish. All students who participate in activities for which an activity stipend is paid are required to purchase an activity



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ticket as a condition of participation since they are the primary beneficiaries of the activity programs. For example, staff activity stipends include: all sports, marching band, forensics, cheerleading, drama, oral interp, DI, FFA, FCCLA, FBLA etc.

**Activity Ticket prices** for 2023-2024 are as follows:

Grades 1-5	\$25.00
Grades 6-12	\$30.00
Adults	\$45 (10 events)
Adults – All Events	\$75.00

**Admission Prices:**

Adults = \$5.00; \$6.00 for double headers  
Students, Grades 1-12 = \$4.00

## **School Cancellations**

All school cancellations or early dismissals due to inclement weather or emergencies will be sent out via the Apptegy Messenger System. Within minutes, Apptegy automatically sends a pre-recorded message to every recipient on a selected list. Parents will be asked to provide phone numbers and e-mail addresses (when available) to the school so that a selected calling list can be created. Emergency cancellations will be broadcast over TV stations KSFY, KDLT, and KELO as well as the District Facebook page and website, [www.grotonarea.com](http://www.grotonarea.com), and by push notifications on the District app (Groton Area Tigers, SD).

## **Groton Area Tigers, SD Mobile App**

The Groton Area School District has a mobile application available for both Apple and Android devices. Search “Groton Area Tigers, SD” in your app store and download the free app. Be sure to set up the app to allow push notifications to receive timely and important updates from your child’s school. The app includes event calendars, athletics schedules, staff contacts, school menus, access to up-to-date news and information and access to archived documents.

## **Immunization Requirements (SDCL 13-28-7.1)**

State law requires that any pupil entering school or an early childhood program in the state shall, prior to admission, be required to present the appropriate school authorities certification from a licensed physician that the new child has received or is in the process of receiving adequate immunization against poliomyelitis, diphtheria, pertussis, rubeola, rubella, mumps, tetanus, and varicella, according to recommendations provided by the Department of Health. The Department of Health may modify or delete any of the required immunizations. As an alternative to the requirement for a physician’s certification, the pupil may present:

- 1) Certificate from a licensed physician stating the physical condition of the child would be such that immunization would endanger the child’s life or health; or
- 2) A written statement signed by one parent or guardian that the child is adherent to a religious doctrine whose teachings are opposed to such immunization; or
- 3) A written statement signed by one parent or guardian requesting that the local health department give the immunization because the parents or guardians lack the means to pay for such immunization.

Students enrolling in 6<sup>th</sup> grade are required to get one dose of Tetanus, Diphtheria, Pertussis (Tdap) vaccine and one dose of Meningococcal vaccine on or after their 11<sup>th</sup> birthday.

## **Harassment and Bullying Policies**

The district has harassment & bullying policies in place in both buildings. Bullying among students can be defined as

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intentional, repeated hurtful acts, words or other behavior, such as name-calling, threatening and/or shunning committed by one or more students against another. This definition also includes “cyber-bullying” which is the sending or posting of cruel or harmful texts or images using the Internet or other digital media such as cell phones, etc. For a complete copy of the district’s harassment or bullying policy, please contact the building principal.

## **Grievance Procedure**

In an effort to maintain effective communications, if you have a particular concern about your child’s progress or about what is happening on the bus, at school, in a class or activity, first discuss it with the driver, teacher, or director of the activity. If your concern or grievance remains unresolved at that level, or if there is a need to share your concern, contact the principal in charge of the school in which your child attends. If the concern/grievance remains unresolved at that level, contact the superintendent. If school policy is at issue or if the concern grievance remains unresolved, you may request that the superintendent include the subject on the school board meeting agenda. To maintain confidentiality, student matters may be confined to an “executive session” with the Board and administration.

## **Complaint Policy for Federal Programs and Homelessness Policy**

A parent, student, employee, or district stakeholder who has a complaint regarding the use of federal funds and is unable to solve the issue, may address the complaint in writing to the district’s superintendent. Disputes addressing the enrollment, transportation, and other barriers to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness are also addressed under this procedure. For a copy of the complete policy, contact the school superintendent or refer to the District web site.

## **Child Find**

Parents or guardians are to be informed that the Groton Area School District 06-6 continuously conducts a “Child Find” search to identify and evaluate District children ages 0-21, with special education needs. Persons who know of a child with un-served education needs may refer the child, by name, to the appropriate building principal. With the parent or guardian’s consent, an evaluation will be made. After the evaluation has been completed, a placement committee will meet with the parent or guardian to determine if special assistance is needed.

## **Title I**

The federal government provides funding to states each year for Title I services. The goal of Title I is to provide extra help in math and reading for eligible students. Students are selected for the program based on information provided by classroom teachers, parents, and achievement test results. Title I services in our district are provided to students in grades K-5, with a strong emphasis on students in grades K-3.

## **Title I Right to Know – Teacher Certification**

As a parent or guardian of a student attending a school that is receiving Federal Title I dollars (Groton Area Elementary), you have the right to know the professional qualifications of the teacher(s) and instructional paraprofessionals who instruct your child. We are happy to provide this information to you. At any time, you may ask:

1. Whether the teacher met state qualifications and certification requirements for the grade level and subject he/she is teaching;
2. Whether the teacher received an emergency or conditional certificate through which state qualifications were waived, and;
3. What undergraduate or graduate degrees the teacher holds, including graduate certificates and additional degrees, and major(s) or area(s) of concentration.

You may also ask whether your child receives help from a paraprofessional. If your child receives this assistance, we can provide you with information about the paraprofessional’s qualifications.

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## Federal Compliance Notice

Students, their parents, and employees of the Groton Area School District #06-6 are hereby notified that this school district does not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, national origin, color, age, disability or religion in employment practices and educational activities. To ensure compliance with Section 427 of GEPA, effective steps shall be taken to remove potential barriers so as to ensure equity of access and participation in grant programs and to achieve high standards. Any person having inquiries concerning compliance or application of Title VI, Affirmative Action, Title IX, Section 504, and the Americans with Disabilities Act is directed to contact Federal Program compliance coordinator, Joe Schwan, Superintendent, Groton Area School District 06-6, Phone 397-2351 or, Department of Education, Civil Rights Office, 8930 Ward Parkway, Suite 2037, Kansas City, MO 64114; Phone: (816) 268-0550; TTD (800) 4370-0833; FAX: (816) 823-1404; Web link: <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html?src=mr>

## FERPA Notification of Rights

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) affords parents and students who are 18 years of age or older ("eligible students") certain rights with respect to the student's education records. These rights are:

1. The right to inspect and review the student's education records within 45 days after the day the Groton Area School District receives a request for access.  
Parents or eligible students should submit to the school principal a written request that identifies the records they wish to inspect. The school official will make arrangements for access and notify the parent or eligible student of the time and place where the records may be inspected.
2. The right to request the amendment of the student's education records that the parent or eligible student believes are inaccurate, misleading, or otherwise in violation of the student's privacy rights under FERPA.  
Parents or eligible students who wish to ask the Groton Area School District to amend a record should write the school principal, clearly identify the part of the record they want changed, and specify why it should be changed. If the school decides not to amend the record as requested by the parent or eligible student, the school will notify the parent or eligible student of the decision and of their right to a hearing regarding the request for amendment. Additional information regarding the hearing procedures will be provided to the parent or eligible student when notified of the right to a hearing.
3. The right to provide written consent before the school discloses personally identifiable information (PII) from the student's education records, except to the extent that FERPA authorizes disclosure without consent.  
One exception, which permits disclosure without consent, is disclosure to school officials with legitimate educational interests. A school official is a person employed by the school as an administrator, supervisor, instructor, or support staff member (including health or medical staff and law enforcement unit personnel) or a person serving on the school board. A school official also may include a volunteer or contractor outside of the school who performs an institutional service of function for which the school would otherwise use its own employees and who is under the direct control of the school with respect to the use and maintenance of PII from education records, such as an attorney, auditor, medical consultant, or therapist; a parent or student volunteering to serve on an official committee, such as a disciplinary or grievance committee; or a parent, student, or other volunteer assisting another school official in performing his or her tasks. A school official has a legitimate educational interest if the official needs to review an education record in order to fulfill his or her professional responsibility.

Upon request, the school discloses education records without consent to officials of another school district in which a student seeks or intends to enroll, or is already enrolled if the disclosure is for purposes of the student's enrollment or transfer.

4. The right to file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education concerning alleged failures by the Groton Area School District to comply with the requirements of FERPA. The name and address of the Office that administers FERPA are:

Family Policy Compliance Office  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20202

### **Student Directory Information**

The Groton Area School District routinely discloses names, addresses, and telephone numbers to the South Dakota Board of Regents, South Dakota Technical Institutions, and upon request, to military recruiters, subject to a parent's or eligible student's request not to disclose such information without written consent. Parents or eligible students who wish to opt-out of the disclosure of this information may contact the school office for the appropriate document or may obtain it here: <https://bit.ly/3fFyC58>

### **Notice of Nondiscrimination**

Applicants for admission and employment, students, parents, employees, and all professional organizations holding negotiated agreements or professional agreements with the school district are hereby notified that this district does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, age, gender, disability, national origin, or ancestry in admission or access to, or treatment or employment in, its programs and activities.

### **Section 504**

Section 504 is the part of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 that applies to persons with disabilities. Section 504 is a civil rights act that protects the civil and constitutional rights of persons with disabilities. It states that no person with a disability can be excluded from or denied benefits of any program receiving federal financial assistance. Section 504 and special education are two separate services.

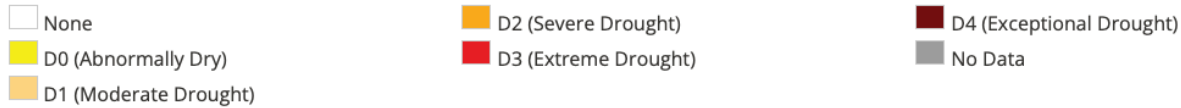
### **Notification of Asbestos in School Building(s)**

In compliance with the Asbestos-Containing Materials in Schools Rule, the Groton Area School District had its school buildings inspected on 1/24/2023 by an asbestos inspector, accredited by the state of South Dakota. During that inspection, areas of suspected asbestos (ACBM) were identified and inspected. The Groton Area School District has an Asbestos Management Plan which provides information on the periodic monitoring of the condition of asbestos (ACBM) remaining in the school buildings. Anyone that would like to see the Asbestos Management Plan can contact a building principal or superintendent.

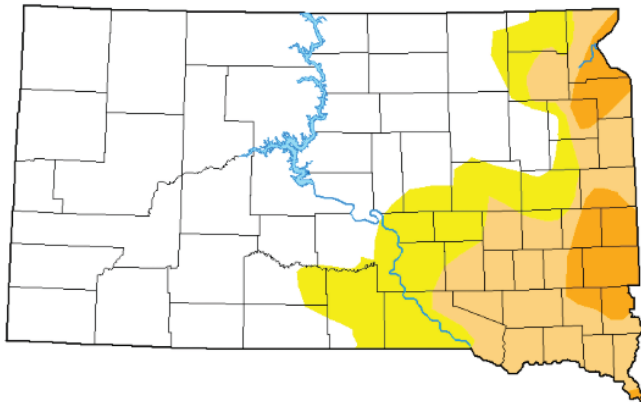
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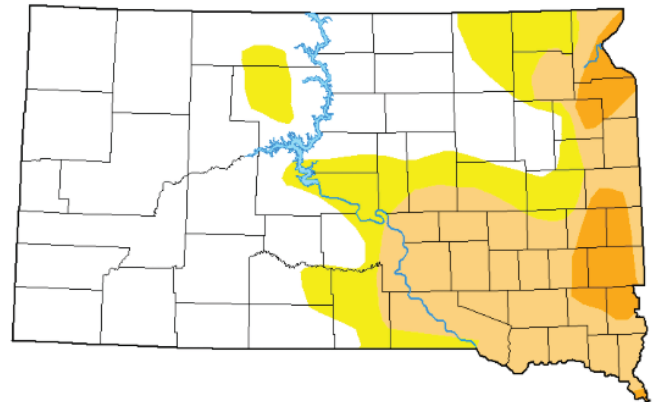
## Drought Classification



## Drought Monitor



August 8



August 1

Above normal precipitation since the beginning of July and a lack of support from the long-term indicators led to a 1-category improvement to west-central Nebraska and bordering areas of Kansas. Recent beneficial precipitation also resulted in improving conditions across parts of the Dakotas and Wyoming. Short-term drought was expanded across northeast North Dakota which remained to the north of the storm track. The lack of Monsoon rainfall this summer resulted in the addition of short-term drought to southwestern Colorado.



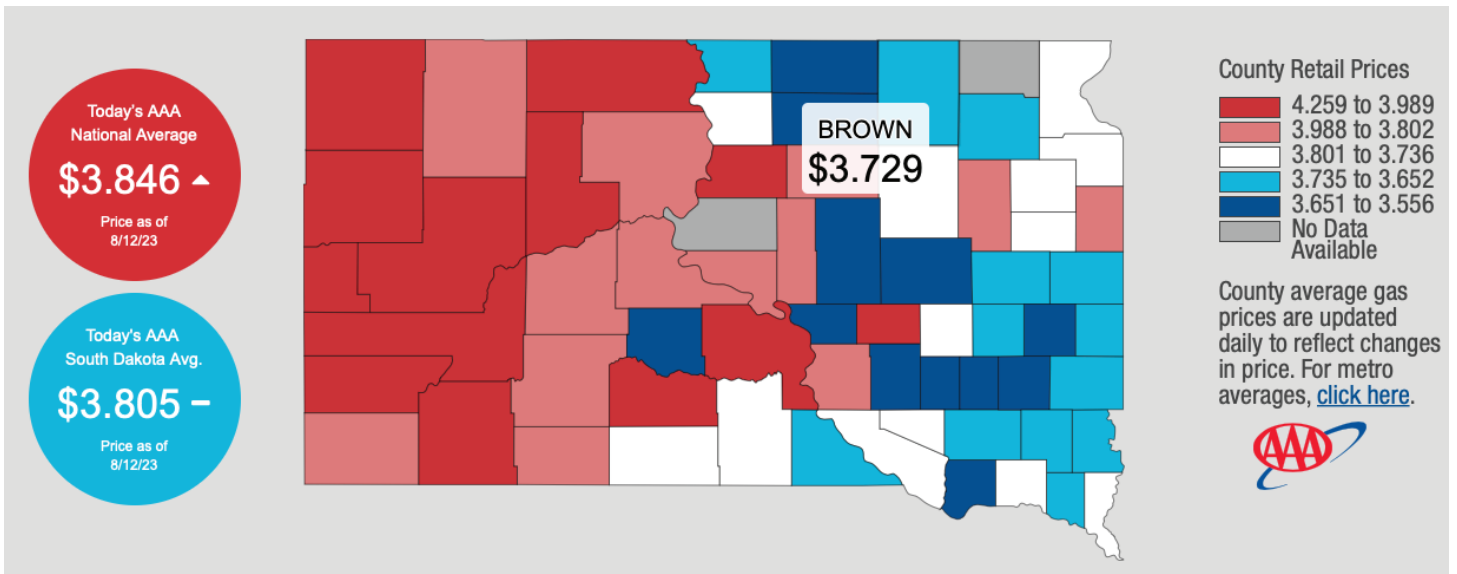
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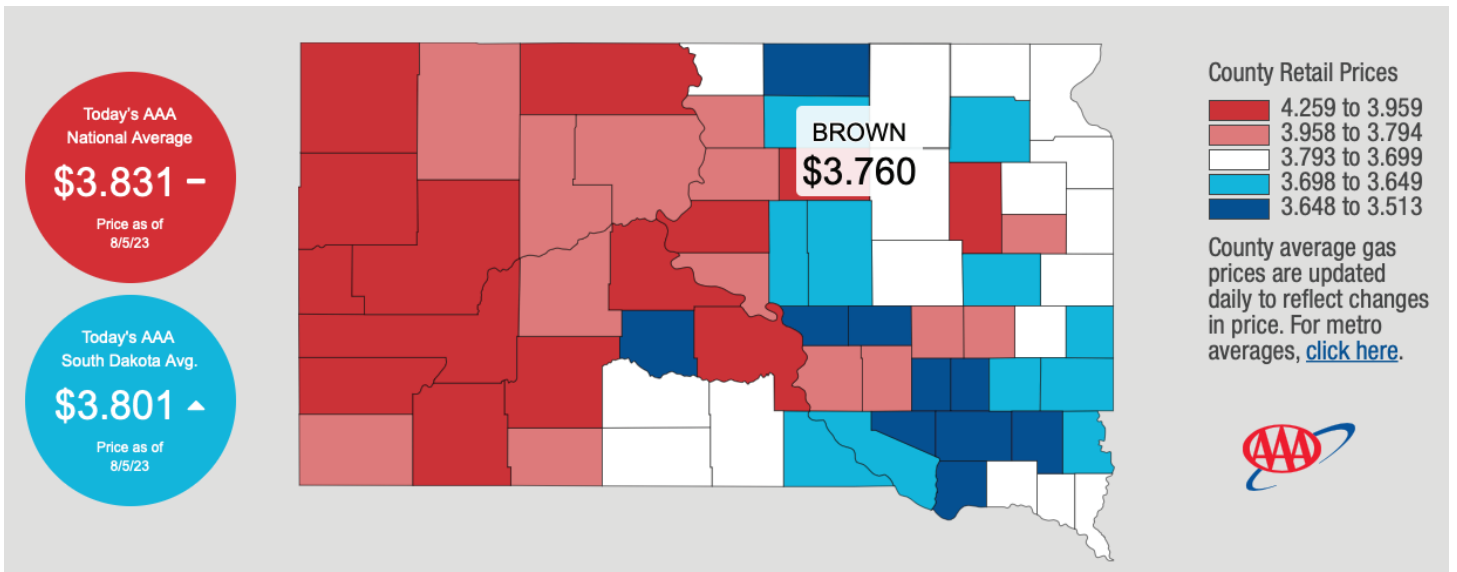
## South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$3.805	\$3.958	\$4.425	\$4.076
Yesterday Avg.	\$3.805	\$3.964	\$4.417	\$4.039
Week Ago Avg.	\$3.801	\$3.943	\$4.409	\$3.997
Month Ago Avg.	\$3.489	\$3.646	\$4.137	\$3.670
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.987	\$4.160	\$4.649	\$4.862

### This Week



### Two Weeks Ago



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**Only one vendor table left after Thursday evening thunderstorms rained out Main Streets Family Fun Night and Fire Department Summer Splash.** (Courtesy Photo Bruce Babcock)



**Mickey and Minnie Mouse were ready for the start of the Family Fun Night in downtown Groton.** (Courtesy Photo Bruce Babcock)



# Huron power struggle sets precedent for rural electric co-ops across US

**Dakota Energy wanted out of contract for better deal, but 8th Circuit said no**

**BY: JOHN HULT - AUGUST 11, 2023 3:30 PM**

In 2019, some board members of the rural electric cooperative Dakota Energy wanted to find out if they could get a better deal for wholesale power on the private market.

Rates, and electric bills by extension, had doubled in 15 years for the 2,300 member-owners who pay the Huron-based co-op for electrical service. Wholesale costs soaked up 70% of the Dakota Energy budget – significantly more than decades past.

But there was a problem. Dakota Energy, which doesn't generate any of its own electricity, was under contract to buy power exclusively from a co-op named East River Electric until 2075.

Madison-based East River gets power from the Oahe Dam and buys power from a co-op named Basin Electric, headquartered in Bismarck. The Dakota Energy leadership in 2019 felt both partners had too much debt and offered too little predictability on rates.

A for-profit Colorado company called Guzman Energy had offered to buy out Dakota Energy's contract with East River in exchange for the chance to sell Dakota Energy power at a lower market rate.

East River refused to give a buyout number.

The dispute bubbled into a yearslong legal battle over the rights of ratepayers and the contractual obligations of nonprofit co-ops.

Dakota Energy sued East River, and later some of Dakota Energy's own member-owners who'd sought to force a vote to shut down the Guzman deal.

East River pushed the case into federal court.

Basin Electric signed on to countersue.

Lawyers for Guzman got involved. A coalition of co-ops did, too.

A town hall was held, radio ads appeared, statements were released and letters to the editor were submitted.

East River set up a website called "Keep Our Co-op."

Some of Dakota Energy's member-owners, even now, feel that their local co-op leadership conspired to upend a long-term relationship with East River.

Bill Folk, one of the Dakota Energy member-owners the co-op sued, said he and many others learned about the Guzman talks on television news.

"They planted a bunch of stuff in the paper," Folk said. "They started running down the manager of East River, printing his salary and everything and saying he was mismanaging things. But this had nothing to do with him. The guy from East River is a good person. It was just totally wrong what they were doing."

### **A decision with big implications**

Last spring and summer, the courts made the call: East River was not obligated to offer a buyout number, and Dakota Energy is legally obligated to stick with East River until 2075.

The 8th Circuit Court of Appeals cast the final die last month when it affirmed a spring 2022 decision saying so, issued by a Sioux Falls judge and appealed by Dakota Energy.

The decision settled the dispute, but it also created a legal precedent likely to have ripple effects for the



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electric co-ops that serve rural Americans from coast to coast.

For Dakota Energy, its loss before the three-judge panel means it can't try to save its member-owners money by breaking its contract for what it saw as a better deal.

"We are disappointed that the ruling ties our hands and prevents us from finding ways to bring real cost savings to our members," said Chase Binger, Dakota Energy board president, "but it is clear to the board that it is time to end the lawsuit. Dakota Energy will remain a full and active member of East River."

For co-ops with contracts similar to Dakota Energy's, particularly those within the 8th Circuit, the ruling means they needn't bother looking into a buyout.

"Outside of the Eighth Circuit, it is yet to be seen how influential the decision will be," Guzman Chief Commercial Officer Robin Lunt said in written answers to South Dakota Searchlight.

Unlike investor-owned utilities like Xcel Energy, electric co-ops aren't required to submit rate hikes for review by public utilities commissions. Instead, elected board members for generation and transmission co-ops like East River set rates. "Profits" from a co-op are meant to be returned to member-owners.

The contracts and lack of oversight can create an unfair situation for distribution co-ops like Dakota Energy, Lunt said.

Lunt said that if co-ops like East River are not "regulated by government oversight, disciplined through competition and do not actually adhere to the 'open and voluntary membership' code of cooperative membership, distribution cooperatives risk being left behind in a time of energy transition. This can lead to a very troubling place."

East River and its backers, however, see the ruling as a win for the cooperative concept that made rural electrification possible in the first place.

A loss, they say, would have enabled smaller co-ops partnered with larger ones all across the nation to follow Dakota Energy's lead and jump ship, potentially whittling away buying power and reliability for those left behind.

"The affirmation of this contract is a foundational piece of the future of the co-ops," said Jeff Nelson, who worked for East River for 40 years before retiring in 2014. "Is it huge? I think it is absolutely huge. If you believe that scope and scale is important to your future, you can't attack the critical mass of that by saying 'we just want to leave and nobody else will.'"

## Contract disputes part of co-op history

Long-term contracts are almost as defining a feature of co-ops as profit-sharing. Lengthy contracts that guarantee a steady flow of cash are used in the absence of a profit history to secure loans for multi-million dollar system investments.

"Co-ops, if you want to serve rural areas, are always high-debt, high-capital needs operations," Nelson said.

It's an operational model that emerged in 1936, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed legislation enabling the creation of cooperatives. The law was meant to address the challenging economics of getting electricity to places like rural South Dakota, where energy companies don't see enough customers to justify the cost of power lines and substations. The mechanism for electric service delivery was the extension of low-interest loans, backed by the security of co-ops' shared commitment to servicing debts.

The first co-op in South Dakota was founded in 1937.

Dakota Energy was built through that co-op system. In 1949, the two co-ops that would later merge to form Dakota Energy were founding members of East River, which now sends power across its transmission lines to 23 small co-ops and one city in eastern South Dakota.

East River was formed to boost its members' bargaining power as the federal government began to allocate energy from the hydroelectric facilities being built on the Missouri River through the 1950s, Nelson said.

That power began to flow in earnest in the early 1960s, he said, but the co-ops already knew they'd need more. That's where Basin Electric came in. That co-op was formed in 1961 to get low-interest loans on coal plants whose output could offer supplemental power.

The system made electrification possible for rural South Dakota, Nelson said, but the long-term contracts haven't always been popular. In addition to pricing concerns, modern co-ops are increasingly focused on

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renewable energy, as are their investor-owned counterparts. The Biden administration included \$9.7 billion in the Inflation Reduction Act to help co-ops move away from coal-fired power.

Basin Electric has already indicated an interest in applying for some of that money. Smaller co-ops might also have a shot at some funding, depending on how current contract provisions and contract renegotiation talks play out for them individually.

Some rural co-ops have expressed concern that their contracts might lock them into dirtier fuel, even as other utilities shift to greener sources.

The Dakota Energy situation didn't focus heavily on a better mix of renewables through a shift to Guzman, though it was noted as a potential benefit. Aside from that aspect of the discussions, the rift shares many of the same features as the disputes that arose historically in South Dakota each time a smaller co-op reworked its contracts. Dakota Energy did that in 1995 and 2015, just as other co-op partners of East River have on multiple occasions over the years.

"I would sometimes describe it as a long-term marriage where every 10 years, you get your marriage license out and have an opportunity for both parties to tell the other all the things they don't like about why they're married," Nelson said.

## **Contracts, debt, free market factor into dispute**

In the past, Nelson said, East River had always been able to resolve issues about debt, contract length and maneuverability during those negotiations.

For Dakota Energy, the possibility of a Guzman buyout came at a time of not just higher energy costs, but during a period of financial losses for a Basin Electric-owned coal gasification plant that operates as a separate, for-profit entity.

Binger, the Dakota Energy board president, was among the leaders who saw the plant as a drag on East River and its 24 partners.

A move away from East River would benefit the cooperative, Binger said during a recorded town hall meeting in spring 2021. The meeting was meant to make the case for the lawsuit against East River, which had commenced the previous fall.

"We believe there are better and more flexible options out there," Binger said during the town hall.

At that same meeting, Dakota Energy CEO Chad Felderman pointed to the gasification plant's financial losses as proof that his co-op was "paying more than our share."

Guzman officials at the town hall pointed to lower electric bills for the member-owners of a New Mexico co-op called Kit Carson, which successfully separated from its nonprofit power supplier and signed on with Guzman.

Guzman was offering 10- to 15-year fixed rates for power, which Binger said was as appealing as lower market costs for power because the fixed rates would offer protection against future rate hikes.

Binger said East River's rate hikes through 2019, the debt load, the possibility of savings and moves by other co-ops in the western U.S. motivated the discussion.

"I mean, when you're looking at those losses being bled up there to begin with, it was a huge thing," Binger said.

East River has consistently claimed that the departure of Dakota Energy, whose payments represent 4-5% of its budget, would saddle other co-ops with the remaining costs.

Binger said that argument wouldn't hold water if Dakota Energy had been allowed to buy out the contract.

"We would have paid our fair share out," Binger said. "Us leaving would not have hurt the other co-ops."

The 8th Circuit loss shut down a Guzman deal. A similar decision out of South Carolina in 2022 ruled against a buyout demand from a co-op in that state called Marlboro Electric Cooperative. It came around the same time Dakota Energy lost in U.S. District Court in South Dakota, setting up the 8th Circuit appeal.

But Binger noted that those rulings aren't the only approach to co-op contract buyouts.

Last fall, an administrative law judge with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) endorsed a methodology for calculating buyouts in a dispute between United Power and Tri-State in Colorado – a state outside the jurisdiction of the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals. That decision cleared a path for the pro-



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duction of buyout prices for Tri-State's co-op partners.

Those buyout numbers are key to informed decision-making by rural co-ops, Guzman executive Lunt said.

In the absence of a buyout price from East River, she said, a final number for savings to Dakota Energy ratepayers was never produced. A letter of intent signed by Dakota Energy, she said, aimed for a 15% reduction in homeowner electric bills – a figure Lunt said is supported by the experience of Kit Carson in New Mexico and the Delta-Montrose Electric Association in Colorado.

"The pursuit of cheaper wholesale power is sadly a move that (Dakota Energy) member-owners have been denied," Lunt said.

## **East River: Rates competitive, gas plant beneficial**

East River's anti-Guzman website says East River's rates are competitive in the region, have declined for three years in a row – a trend that began shortly after Dakota Energy filed suit – and that it expects prices to hold steady in the near term.

The same website also pointed to additional market fees attached to Kit Carson bills, essentially arguing that the proposed deal in South Dakota wouldn't return the promised results.

As to the gasification plant, East River spokesman Chris Studer told South Dakota Searchlight it has returned to a stable financial condition. It produces agricultural chemicals and gas derived from coal, and Studer said those operations have been profitable for the past few years.

"When Dakota Gasification does well, that comes over to Basin Electric and helps us keep our rates lower. When natural gas prices are low, Dakota Gasification can be a drain on Basin Electric's financials."

Regarding the buyout number, Studer said the ever-changing energy market makes it incredibly difficult to guess what a co-op's obligation might look like decades into the future.

"The trouble that you have when you go down that road is 'what's a fair buyout price?' Electricity is moving all over the place every single day," Studer said.

A buyout number also would have sparked potentially lengthy negotiations, he said, which he argues would have distracted both East River and Dakota Energy from serving member-owners.

Nelson, the former head of East River, sides with his former employer in the Dakota Energy dispute.

But he also said he understands the appeal of Guzman's offer.

"The people at Guzman are smart people," Nelson said. "They've demonstrated that they can do what they promise to do. But they can only tell you their own perspective."

Moving forward

The 8th Circuit ruling ensures Dakota Energy and East River will remain partners for decades to come, but the impact of the heated dispute might have a long tail.

This month, Dakota Energy will hold an election for its board of directors. Bill Folk and his wife, Twyla, who was also sued for trying to push an anti-Guzman vote, are among those who'd like to see three new board members elected who will change Dakota Energy's bylaws to prevent a departure from East River without a member vote.

"We're worried that they have not told us the truth in the past," said Twyla Folk, who has penned multiple letters to the Huron Plainsman newspaper decrying the Guzman talks. "And maybe we need new members in there that will tell us what's going on."

Binger would like to see the opposite – a board willing to update the bylaws in a way that makes clear that the Huron co-op has the right to look for a better deal.

The court ruling was a disappointment, Binger said, but he hopes that opening up the questions of independence and freedom of movement for local co-ops will produce future contract renegotiations that end with more options for Dakota Energy.

If solar and wind power become more available in the area, for example, Binger would like Dakota Energy to have a chance at buying some of it.

"With our contract right now, we can do nothing but buy power from Basin and East River," he said.

*John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux falls Argus Leader.*

## 'I want to speak life into people': State takes all-in approach to suicide prevention

**Second day of conference focuses on affirmation, intervention, support**

**BY: JOHN HULT - FRIDAY AUGUST 11, 2023 4:19 PM**

SIOUX FALLS — Roslyn Ward lost her 35-year-old son to suicide last October.

The loss turned the Lemmon mother into an advocate for suicide prevention, and she founded an organization called "Hope ... Your Life Matters."

Ward was on hand Friday in Sioux Falls for the South Dakota Suicide Prevention Conference to gather ideas, inspiration and information she can take back to her small town on the North Dakota border.

At this point, she takes calls from families, tells her story and encourages others to learn more about how to talk about suicide. The group has partnered with Three Rivers Mental Health in Lemmon. Ward has held raffles to support Three Rivers, and the organization has helped her craft and deliver suicide prevention materials and bring in speakers.

But Ward's go-to move when she meets someone isn't to lead with statistics or strategy. Instead, if they're willing, she takes their hand, slides a rubber "Hope" band around their wrist and starts to speak.

"I look them in the eye and I tell them, 'This is in remembrance of my son, who died by suicide. He had the kindest heart. And I know that he would like you to know that you are amazing, that you're good and that your life matters. What you do matters. And always, always remember that we all have a purpose and a reason to live. Never forget that ever,'" Ward said. "That's what I do. Because I want to speak life into people."

### **More partners in more places**

People like Ward who speak words like that are key players in the state of South Dakota's approach to suicide prevention.

At this point, the strategy could be described as everything, everywhere all at once.

Crisis response centers, training in and outside state organizations, and mobile crisis outreach have ramped up since 2020, but recent efforts have drawn on people and groups outside the mental health profession:

The Department of Social Services now trains its frontline economic assistance staff in crisis first aid. The eight-hour trainings include talk of suicide resources and role playing to help frontline workers respond when a Medicaid or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program applicant shows signs of crisis.

The DSS and state Department of Health offer the same training to Emergency Medical Technicians and law enforcement, especially in rural areas where EMTs or police might be the first to respond to a cry for help.

The agencies aim to boost peer-to-peer support by educating young people and others on what to ask or say to prop up their peers in times of need – and on who to call in their area if things get out of hand.

The 988 suicide hotline, used by thousands of South Dakotans since launching last year, will soon get a boost from a grant to train counselors in culturally relevant approaches to helping Native American callers.

It's all part of a multi-pronged approach built on the notion that suicide prevention – and mental wellness in general – can't be tackled effectively by counselors and state employees alone, said Matt Althoff, South Dakota's DSS secretary.

"What we're after is the salvation of lives," Althoff said. "There are absolutely different ways to get to all of those lives."

### **'Notes to Self'**

A new marketing campaign called "Notes to Self," revealed by Althoff on the second day of the suicide prevention conference, leans in to the notion that everyone has a role in suicide prevention and mental wellness.

The campaign's taglines, "you matter – no matter what," "you belong here," or "you matter to someone's mental health," all tie to that premise. The ads and educational materials offer basic guides for deeds, words and habits that help people stay aware of their emotions, triggers and needs.

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Althoff presented a television ad Friday that followed a farmer moving through his day, finding notes of affirmation along the way. He first sees one on the coffee pot in an empty kitchen early in the morning. He grabs his coffee and heads out to his tractor. The video cuts away to a shot of the farmer in the cab, where he opens his lunchbox to see a note that reads "we're proud of you."

The ads are meant to be an entry point to a DSS Behavioral Health toolkit. Beyond affirmations, the tools for educators and the public include postcard-sized forms to create gratitude lists or lists of people to call for support, exercises on how to verbalize and manage grief and advice on how to create "code words" for children to use in a call or text if they feel unsafe. A "circles of control" postcard encourages people to list their stressors and sort them into things that can be controlled, influenced or not controlled by the person writing the list.

"It's a way of saying 'let's talk about our mental health in a way that's supportive,'" said Tiffany Wolfgang, head of behavioral health for the DSS. "We wanted to talk to people before they're in crisis."

Speaker: Outreach, affirmation save lives

Friday's keynote speaker, Kevin Hines, preached the gospel of support and outreach just after Althoff's presentation. Hines jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge at age 19. Today, nearly 23 years later, he's become a suicide prevention advocate, author and speaker.

Wandering through the crowd with a wireless microphone, in a T-shirt that read "Be Here Tomorrow," Hines said the courage to show concern can save lives.

"Are you OK? Is something wrong? Can I help?" Hines said. "They were the words I desperately needed to hear the day I found myself standing on top of that bridge, believing beyond a shadow of a doubt that I had not one other course of action but to die by these two hands from lethal, emotional pain."

Against the odds, Hines survived. Doctors and paramedics told him they'd never pulled a living person from the water below the bridge after a jump.

He still struggles with suicidal thoughts, he said, but the statistical rarity of his survival prompted a pledge "to never die by my hands." When suicidal thoughts come, he finds a mirror and says the same thing.

The crowd joined him in repeating an affirmation.

"My thoughts (my thoughts!) do not (do not!) have to become (have to become!) my actions (my actions). They can simply be (they can simply be) my thoughts (my thoughts)."

## Hope for all-hands approach

Wolfgang's voice cracked with emotion as she took the microphone after Hines' motivational stemwinder. The behavioral health director, noting the value Hines placed on hearing affirmations, encouraged attendees to fill out one of the "You matter no matter what" postcards on the tables to be distributed around the state.

"Be that someone to care for someone else," Wolfgang said moments before closing the conference at noon on Friday. "Write a note to someone. Leave it in a box. Inmates, kids in care, individuals in a psychiatric unit – they need to know someone cares."

The needs are great in South Dakota. Suicide rates have grown faster in the state than elsewhere in the country, and the issue is more pronounced in Native American communities. The number of students experiencing bouts of depression and seriously pondering suicide have jumped alongside that growth.

The day before Hines' talk, Wolfgang and Althoff told South Dakota Searchlight that the recent past and the widening net of mental health resources offer reasons to be optimistic.

Crisis units meant to house and stabilize people in the short-term have proliferated. Pivot Point opened in Rapid City last month. Avera St. Luke's in Aberdeen is adding five crisis beds to its existing 10-bed mental health unit. Lewis and Clark Behavioral Services in Yankton is adding beds to its facilities for the same purpose.

The DSS officials also pointed to mobile crisis teams, which have been available for a decade in Sioux Falls and are now accessible in some form across dozens of South Dakota counties. In rural areas, law enforcement can reach a crisis counselor via telehealth during a mental wellness call.

A fact sheet offered at the conference noted that virtual crisis care was used 481 times in 38 South

Dakota counties between 2021 and May of this year. Seventy-two percent of the people who received it stayed in their homes after the visit.

There are efforts afoot to bring those services to more remote areas through a pilot project involving first responders, community mental health providers and law enforcement in northeast South Dakota, Wolfgang said, and similar efforts are underway for Charles Mix and Union counties.

Further expansion of such programs to rural and tribal areas will depend on continued collaboration with local organizations and with local law enforcement, who are often the first and nearest responder in a crisis in remote areas of South Dakota, Althoff said.

In some areas, he said, a family doctor or local counselor might be available to take on the role of crisis response. Others might benefit from telehealth. Tribal communities might already have or want to work with culturally aware responders who could offer to smudge (burn sage to carry prayers to the creator on the smoke) with a person in crisis.

"It's the kind of thing that really needs to be sort of a ground-up approach, married with statewide re-sourcing," Althoff said. "Us trying to impose a resource on every community isn't going to work."

*John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux falls Argus Leader.*

## Draft language released for potential recreational marijuana ballot measure

**BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - AUGUST 11, 2023 3:52 PM**

South Dakota voters could have another chance to legalize recreational marijuana next year.

The state's voters rejected recreational cannabis legalization in 2022, 53% to 47%.

The new petition comes from Matthew Schweich, of Sioux Falls, a longtime leader in pro-marijuana efforts. On Friday, state Attorney General Marty Jackley fulfilled his legal obligation to release a draft explanation of the potential ballot question.

Jackley's explanation of the three-page petition says, in part, that the ballot measure would allow people 21 and older to possess, grow, sell, ingest and distribute marijuana. Individuals could possess up to 2 ounces of marijuana and up to six marijuana plants, with a limit of 12 plants per household.

Marijuana would remain off-limits for people younger than 21, and driving under the influence of marijuana would remain illegal.

Limits would be imposed on locations, such as schools, where marijuana could be used. Employers could still restrict employee use of marijuana, and property owners could also regulate it on their property.

The measure would not affect laws that have legalized hemp, or the laws that govern the state's medical marijuana program. South Dakota voters approved medical marijuana in 2020, although there's a potential ballot question under review that would ask voters to repeal it.

Jackley noted in his explanation that marijuana remains illegal under federal law. He did not mention that 23 states have legalized recreational cannabis.

The public has until Aug. 21 to provide written comments to the Attorney General's Office on Jackley's draft explanation. The final explanation is due to the secretary of state on Aug. 31.

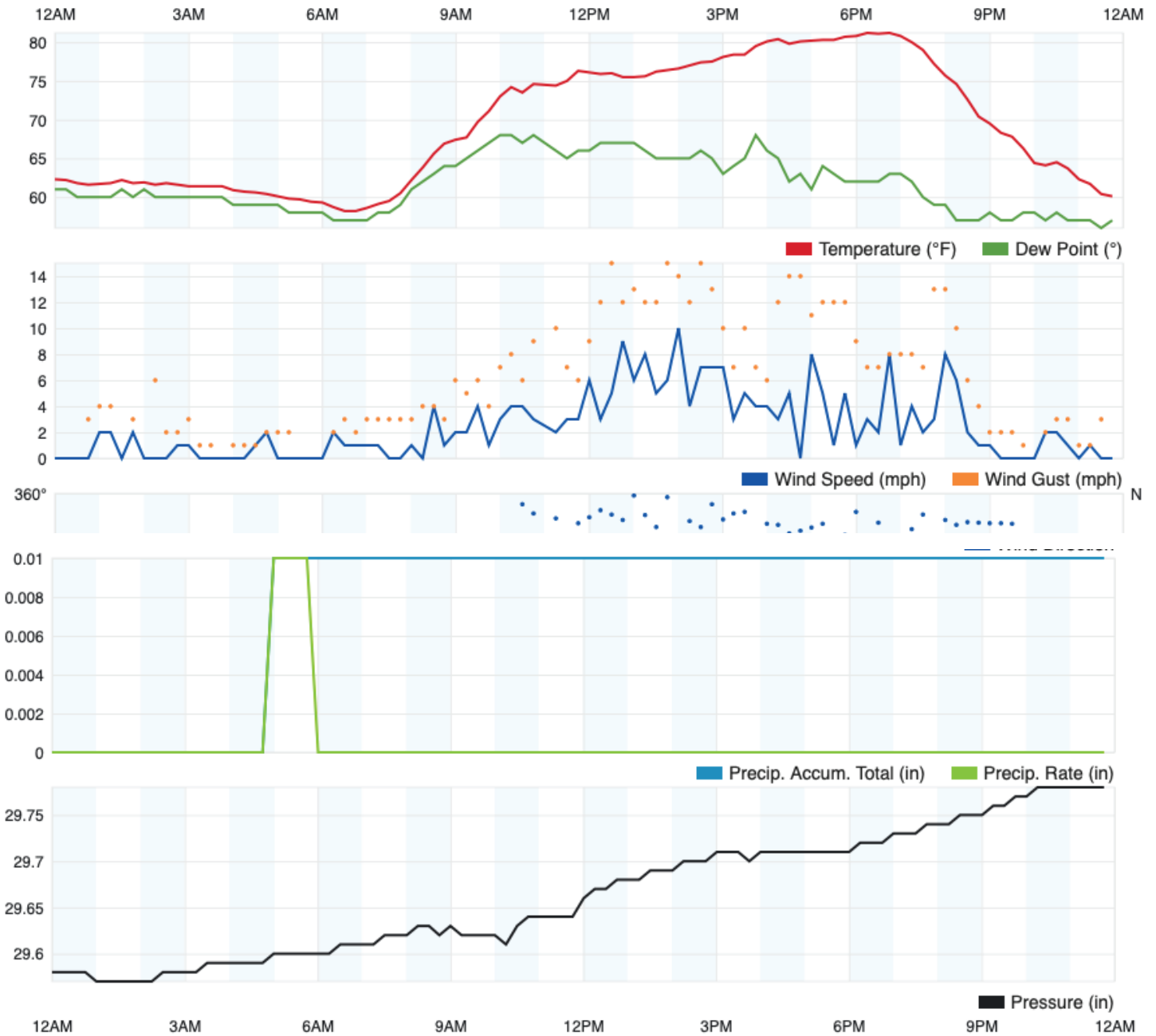
The petition needs 17,509 signatures from registered South Dakota voters by May 7, 2024, to qualify for the Nov. 5, 2024, general election ballot.

There are numerous potential ballot issues for 2024, including questions on abortion rights, open primary elections, sales taxes on food, legislative term limits, and more.

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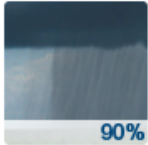
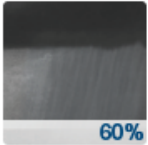



## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday	Monday Night	Tuesday
						
Sunny	Partly Cloudy then Chance T-storms	Showers	Showers Likely	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny
High: 83 °F	Low: 59 °F	High: 68 °F	Low: 54 °F	High: 75 °F	Low: 53 °F	High: 83 °F



## Severe Weather Potential Saturday Night

August 12, 2023  
3:46 AM

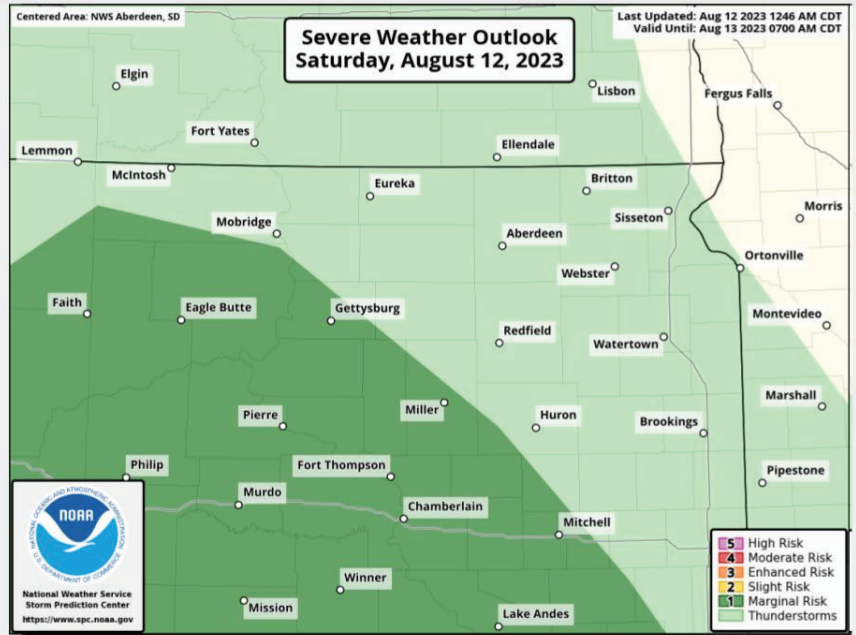
### Hazards

Large hail and gusty winds are the main threats.

### Timing/Location

Thunderstorms over western South Dakota later this afternoon will spread eastward overnight. There is a limited severe threat (1 out of 5) over central SD.

Tornado	Low	Med	High
Hail	Low	Med	High
Wind	Low	Med	High
Flooding	Low	Med	High



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Thunderstorms over western South Dakota will spread eastward tonight. Locations in the Marginal Risk area could see quarter-size hail and 60 mph winds. The severe threat is limited over northeastern South Dakota.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 82 °F at 6:39 PM

Low Temp: 58 °F at 6:33 AM

Wind: 16 mph at 1:51 PM

Precip: : 0.01

Day length: 14 hours, 18 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 102 in 1933

Record Low: 40 in 1898

Average High: 84

Average Low: 58

Average Precip in Aug.: 0.87

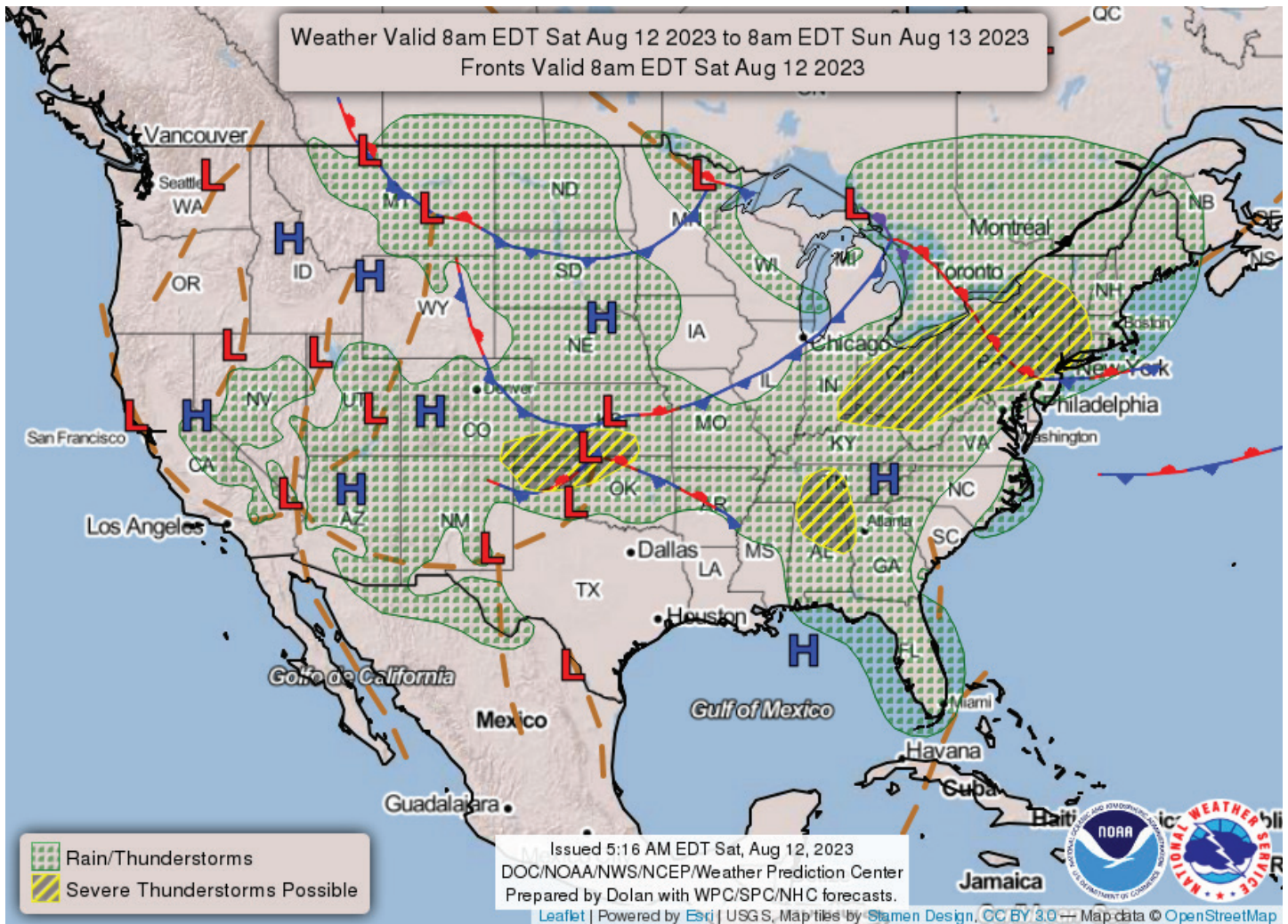
Precip to date in Aug.: 3.27

Average Precip to date: 14.97

Precip Year to Date: 15.94

Sunset Tonight: 8:46:47 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:29:19 AM



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## Today in Weather History

August 12, 1986: Thunderstorms produced 2.53 inches of rain in twenty minutes in downtown Rapid City. The heavy rain caused street and basement flooding. Golf ball size hail fell in Zeona, in Perkins County, which covered the ground.

1752: The following is from the Journals of the Rev. Thomas Smith, and the Rev. Samuel Deane, published in 1849. "In the evening there was dismal thunder and lightning, and abundance of rain, and such a hurricane as was never the like in these parts of the world." This hurricane struck Portland, Maine.

1778 - A Rhode Island hurricane prevented an impending British-French sea battle, and caused extensive damage over southeast New England. (David Ludlum)

1933 - The temperature at Greenland Ranch in Death Valley, CA, hit 127 degrees to establish a U.S. record for the month of August. (The Weather Channel)

1936 - The temperature at Seymour, TX, hit 120 degrees to establish a state record. (The Weather Channel)

1955 - During the second week of August hurricanes Connie and Diane produced as much as 19 inches of rain in the northeastern U.S. forcing rivers from Virginia to Massachusetts into a high flood. Westfield MA was deluged with 18.15 inches of rain in 24 hours, and at Woonsocket RI the Blackstone River swelled from seventy feet in width to a mile and a half. Connecticut and the Delaware Valley were hardest hit. Total damage in New England was 800 million dollars, and flooding claimed 187 lives. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Early afternoon thunderstorms in Arizona produced 3.90 inches of rain in ninety minutes at Walnut National Monument (located east of Flagstaff), along with three inches of pea size hail, which had to be plowed off the roads. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Fifteen cities in the northeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Youngstown OH reported twenty-six days of 90 degree weather for the year, a total equal to that for the entire decade of the 1970s. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms were scattered across nearly every state in the Union by late in the day. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 75 mph at Fergus Falls MN, and golf ball size hail and wind gusts to 60 mph at Black Creek WI. In the Chicago area, seven persons at a forest preserve in North

2004: Hurricane Charley was the third named storm and the second hurricane of the 2004 Atlantic hurricane season. Charley lasted from August 9 to August 15, and at its peak intensity, it attained 150 mph winds, making it a strong Category 4 hurricane on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale. It made landfall in southwestern Florida at maximum strength, making it the most powerful hurricane to hit the United States since Hurricane Andrew struck Florida in 1992.

2005: A tornado strikes Wright, Wyoming, a coal-mining community, killing two and destroying 91 homes and damaging about 30 more in around the town.



Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### TRUSTING THE PLAN

Years ago I would watch my mother embroider beautiful napkins, pillowcases, and tablecloths. She would spend hours working within a small "hoop" that stretched the fabric tight so she could follow the pattern. She would work with one color of thread at a time until she finished that part of the pattern. Then, she would move to the next part of the pattern and begin again.

If I looked underneath the "hoop," I would see many knots and dangling threads that made no sense at all. It looked like a real mess. When I looked carefully at the top side of the "hoop," however, I would eventually see a pattern emerge that followed the plan of an artist. And, when the product was finished, it was beautiful.

There are times when it seems as though life is made up of "many knots and dangling threads." No matter where we look, nothing makes any sense at all. We feel forced to cry out, "Lord, what are You doing?" or "Where are you taking me?" or "I want to give up!" or "What's happening?" or "Have you no plan for me, God?"

When times are tough, we must turn to and trust in His Word: "I know the plans I have for you 'Plans for good and not for evil' to give you a future and a hope!" Look for the pattern. It's there!

Prayer: Lord, when days are dark and the path is perilous, let us sense Your presence and trust Your plan. Help us to see our lives through Your eyes! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. Jeremiah 29:11



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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## 2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 06/17/2023 Groton Triathlon
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/10/2023 Family Fun Fest, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am



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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
08.08.23

13 19 20 32 33 14

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$20,000,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 9 Mins 33  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
08.09.23

1 10 12 33 39 5

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$7,750,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 24  
DRAW: Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
08.10.23

8 15 23 38 42 15

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 16 Hrs 39 Mins 33  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
08.09.23

13 15 25 27 29

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$20,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 39  
DRAW: Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
08.09.23

1 42 51 61 63 17

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 8  
DRAW: Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
08.09.23

10 15 21 67 69 3

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$194,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 8  
DRAW: Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### **Sioux Falls police officer was justified in shooting burglary suspect, attorney general says**

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A Sioux Falls police officer was justified in shooting a burglary suspect who pointed a gun at the officer last month, South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley says.

The suspect, Sean Henry David Kilbourn, survived.

"This was a tense incident where the suspect, who was on parole, stole a firearm from a homeowner and pointed the loaded handgun at the officer who was responding to a call for assistance," Jackley said in a statement Thursday. "Evidence collected at the scene, witness statements, and a review of the video from the body-worn and dashboard cameras indicate that the officer was justified in using lethal force."

The incident began July 13 when a homeowner reported a man burglarizing a vehicle in his garage. Kilbourn allegedly stole a 9mm handgun from the vehicle and pointed the gun at the homeowner. Hours later, on July 14, three officers who were at an intersection discussing another matter noticed Kilbourn approaching their location, then suddenly turning and walking the other way. The officers, who noticed that Kilbourn matched the description of the burglary suspect, told him to stop, but he ran.

The suspect was found lying on the ground next to a shed. When Kilbourn raised the loaded handgun at the officer, Jackley said, the officer fired multiple rounds, striking Kilbourn once in the left buttock. He was treated at a hospital and released, then arrested on charges of possession of firearm by a former drug offender and violating parole. His criminal record included drug and other convictions, including assaulting a law enforcement officer.

### **Russia downs 20 drones over Crimea following a spate of attacks on Moscow**

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia thwarted an attack by 20 Ukrainian drones targeting Moscow-annexed Crimea overnight, the Russian Defense Ministry said Saturday.

Fourteen drones were shot down by Russian air defenses and a further six were jammed electronically, the ministry said in a Telegram post. No casualties or damage were reported. Kyiv officials neither confirmed nor denied Ukraine's involvement in the attacks.

As videos circulated on Russian social media Saturday appearing to show smoke rising above a bridge linking Russia to Crimea, the annexed peninsula's Moscow-appointed governor, Sergei Aksyonov, reported that Russian air defense had also prevented an attack there by shooting down two Ukrainian missiles.

The bridge was not damaged, he said, although traffic was briefly halted. An adviser to Aksyonov, Oleg Kryuchkov, claimed that "a smoke screen was put up by special services."

Russia's Foreign Ministry "strongly condemned" the attempted attack on the Crimean bridge. The ministry said in a statement that such "barbaric actions" by the Armed Forces of Ukraine "will not go unanswered."

Shortly after reporting the downing of the two Ukrainian missiles, Aksyonov said Russian air defense had shot down another missile over the Kerch Strait.

The bridge connecting Crimea and Russia across the Kerch Strait carries heavy significance for Moscow, both logistically and psychologically, as a key artery for military and civilian supplies and as an assertion of Kremlin control of the peninsula it illegally annexed in 2014.

Last week, a Ukrainian sea drone hit a Russian tanker near the bridge, while an attack on the bridge last month killed a couple and seriously wounded their daughter, leaving a span of the roadway hanging perilously. The damage appeared to be less severe than that caused by an assault in October, but it again highlighted the bridge's vulnerability.

The attempted drone and missile attacks follow three consecutive days of drone attacks on the Russian

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capital, Moscow. Firing drones at Russia, after more than 17 months of war, has little apparent military value for Ukraine but the strategy has served to unsettle Russians and bring home to them the conflict's consequences.

Drone attacks have increased in recent weeks both on Moscow and on Crimea, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014 — a move that most of the world considered illegal.

Elsewhere, Russia claimed Saturday it had regained control of the village of Urozhaine in Ukraine's easternmost Luhansk region in an overnight counterattack.

A 73-year-old woman was killed early Saturday morning in Russian shelling of Ukraine's northeastern Kharkiv region, according to regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov.

Ukrainian internal affairs minister Ihor Klymenko said a police officer was killed and 12 people wounded when a guided Russian aerial bomb hit the city of Orikhiv in Ukraine's partially occupied southern Zaporizhzhia region. Four of the wounded were also police officers, he said.

Local officials said explosions rang out Saturday morning in the central Ukrainian city of Kryvyi Rih, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's hometown, but that there were no known casualties.

On Ukraine's Black Sea coast, the city of Odesa opened several beaches for the first time since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Odesa Gov. Oleh Kiper said that six beaches were open, but he stressed that accessing beaches during air raid alerts was forbidden.

The strategic port and key hub for exporting grain has been subject to repeated missile and drone attacks — particularly since Moscow canceled a landmark grain deal last month amid Kyiv's grinding efforts to retake its occupied territories — while Russian mines have regularly washed up on the city's beaches.

## He's 'just Ken' but will the 'Barbie' movie change his popularity?

By WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — On and off the big screen, it's Barbie's world and Ken is just living in it.

As reflected in Greta Gerwig's blockbuster movie that tackles the legacy Mattel's famous doll, Barbie has always been more popular than Ken. For every Ken doll sold today, there's generally eight to 10 Barbies sold, according to Jim Silver, a toy industry expert and CEO of review site of TTPM.

It's unclear if Warner Bros' "Barbie," which was also co-produced by Mattel, will increase Ken production and sales. But Silver noted that the movie "gave Ken more attention than Ken has received" in decades.

Ken was first introduced back in 1961, two years after Barbie hit store shelves. But he hasn't had nearly the same impact on the Barbieverse since.

"Barbie's world is about Barbie. And (to some), Ken may be an accessory of sorts," said Ed Timke, an assistant professor of advertising and public relations at Michigan State University, pointing to years of marketing that has, naturally, put Barbie at center stage.

The new attention around Ken following "Barbie's" release has also received pushback. Many note that the movie is about Barbie — not Ken — and that's where the spotlight should stay.

Still, the dynamic between the film's Barbie and Ken may get people to reflect some big questions about gender as well as Ken's own evolution over the years.

Who is Ken as a toy and how has he changed?

Ken's relationship to Barbie has been up for debate since the two hit the toy aisle together. While Mattel long-advertised Ken as Barbie's boyfriend — and even detailed their 2004 split and subsequent reconciliation seven years later — many also saw Ken as Barbie's best friend, and sometimes queer icon. One 1993 version of Ken in particular, Earring Magic Ken, became notably popular among LGBTQ consumers, the New York Historical Society notes. At the time, Mattel denied the Earring Magic Ken was queer and later pulled him from shelves.

Other popular versions of Ken ranged from the tuxedo-wearing 1984 Dream Date Ken, to 1978 Superstar Ken and 1979 Sun Malibu Ken, which became one of the doll's most iconic looks (as reflected in Ryan Gosling's character). While Ken has gone through far fewer career changes than Barbie, his resume boasts

job titles like astronaut, barista, country western singer and doctor.

"A wonderful thing is that through play, children are free to have their dolls take on any type of role that they wish," said Ann Herzog, a clinical instructor of child life and family-centered care at Boston University.

She also underlined the importance of diversity in toy collections and providing "open-ended play opportunities and not to endorse stereotypes that the Barbie collection and dolls in general are only specific to a particular gender."

While children of all genders, including young boys, have played with Barbie and Ken over the years, Timke notes that "there's definitely the gendering of marketing toward girls" for both figures, pointing to contrasts in advertising for products historically seen as "boy toys," such as G.I. Joe. That legacy, as well as other socialization, still impacts who plays with certain toys today.

Still, Ken — like Barbie — has evolved over time and become more diverse, particularly after Mattel rolled out more skin tones, body types, hairstyles and more for Ken dolls in 2017. Some Kens also have prosthetic legs, wheelchairs and hearing aids. Increases in diverse representation — with similar changes seen since 2016 for Barbie — has boosted the dolls' popularity and comeback sales, Silver said.

Will Barbie (and Ken) sales increase following the movie's release?

Mattel did not respond to The Associated Press' requests for data or comment on specific Ken and Barbie sales seen before and after "Barbie's" July 21 release. But according to market research firm Circana, Barbie sales overall for the U.S. toy industry increased 40% in the last two weeks of July compared with the same period in 2022.

Circana doesn't break out Ken from Barbie sales. Still, "I suspect that, with the movie, sales of Ken dolls will experience a strong lift in sales," Juli Lennett, VP, U.S. toys industry advisor at Circana, wrote in an email to The Associated Press. Additional experts also expected a spike in interest, but weren't sure about the long run.

Lennett did note that the top-selling "Barbie" movie item for those last two weeks of July was the Barbie Gingham Dress followed by the Ken Doll Set. Between those two items, Barbie outsold Ken nearly two to one, she said.

For the second quarter of 2023, which ended weeks before the movie's release, worldwide sales of Barbie to retailers excluding adjustments actually fell 6%. Mattel executives told analysts that sales had improved in July, and it expects the movie will have a halo effect on the brand for years to come.

There was a carryover of inventory across the toy industry for the first half of the year, Silver explains, noting that record sales in the first years of the pandemic led to over-buying at the end of 2022. He predicts a rebound in Barbie sales heading into the holiday season, when toy spending is high and after "Barbie" eventually makes its way to streaming.

And of course, sales following "Barbie's" release won't be limited to the toy aisle. Other branded products are also gaining popularity from the film, including Ken-focused swag like "I am Kenough" sweatshirts and other "Ken-ergy" apparel, are currently for sale by Mattel, as well as from third-party sellers on sites like Amazon and Walmart.

## **The death toll rises to 80 in Maui wildfires as survivors begin returning to communities in ruins**

By CLAIRE RUSH, TY O'NEIL and JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER Associated Press

LAHAINA, Hawaii (AP) — Survivors witnessed a surreal landscape of flattened homes, blackened hulks of burned-out cars and ashy lots where buildings once stood as they took stock of their shattered lives in the aftermath of a fast-paced wildfire on the Hawaii island of Maui that authorities say killed at least 80 people.

Anthony Garcia assessed the devastation as he stood under Lahaina's iconic banyan tree, now charred, and swept twisted branches into neat piles next to another heap filled with dead animals: cats, roosters and other birds killed by the smoke and flames. Somehow it made sense in a world turned upside-down.

"If I don't do something, I'll go nuts," said Garcia, who lost everything he owned. "I'm losing my faith in God."



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Garcia and other residents were faced with catastrophic destruction resulting from the wildfires that tore through parts of Maui this week and were still not fully contained Friday night.

Maui County raised the number of confirmed deaths to 80 in a 9 p.m. statement Friday. Gov. Josh Green had warned the death toll would likely rise as search and rescue operations continue. Authorities set a curfew from 10 p.m. until 6 a.m. Saturday.

"The recovery's going to be extraordinarily complicated, but we do want people to get back to their homes and just do what they can to assess safely, because it's pretty dangerous," Green told Hawaii News Now.

Cadaver-sniffing dogs were deployed to search for the dead, Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen Jr. said.

A new wildfire Friday evening triggered the evacuation of Kaanapali in West Maui, a community northeast of the area that burned earlier, but crews were able to extinguish the fire before 8:30 p.m., authorities said.

Attorney General Anne Lopez announced plans to conduct a comprehensive review of decision-making and standing policies impacting the response to the deadly wildfires.

"My Department is committed to understanding the decisions that were made before and during the wildfires and to sharing with the public the results of this review," Lopez said in a statement.

The wildfires are the state's deadliest natural disaster in decades, surpassing a 1960 tsunami that killed 61 people. An even deadlier tsunami in 1946, which killed more than 150 on the Big Island, prompted development of a territory-wide emergency system with sirens that are tested monthly.

Many fire survivors said they didn't hear any sirens or receive a warning giving them enough time to prepare, realizing they were in danger only when they saw flames or heard explosions.

"There was no warning," said Lynn Robinson, who lost her home.

Hawaii emergency management records do not indicate warning sirens sounded before people had to run for their lives. Officials sent alerts to mobile phones, televisions and radio stations, but widespread power and cellular outages may have limited their reach.

Fueled by a dry summer and strong winds from a passing hurricane, at least three wildfires erupted on Maui, racing through parched brush covering the island.

The most serious blaze swept into Lahaina on Tuesday and left a grid of gray rubble wedged between the blue ocean and lush green slopes. Associated Press journalists found the devastation included nearly every building on Front Street, the heart of historic Lahaina and the economic hub of Maui.

There was an eerie traffic jam of charred cars that didn't escape the inferno as surviving roosters meandered through the ashes. Skeletal remains of buildings bowed under roofs that pancaked in the blaze. Palm trees were torched, boats in the harbor were scorched and the stench of burning lingered.

"It hit so quick, it was incredible," Kyle Scharnhorst said as he surveyed his damaged apartment complex.

Summer and Gilles Gerling sought to salvage keepsakes from the ashes of their home. All they could find was the piggy bank Summer Gerling's father gave her as a child, their daughter's jade bracelet and watches they gifted each other for their wedding. Their wedding rings were gone.

They described their fear as the strong wind whipped the smoke and flames closer, but said they were happy to have made it out alive with their two children.

"Safety was the main concern. These are all material things," Gilles Gerling said.

The wildfire is already projected to be the second-costliest disaster in Hawaii history, behind only Hurricane Iniki in 1992, according to disaster and risk modeling firm Karen Clark & Company. The fire is the deadliest in the U.S. since the 2018 Camp Fire in California, which killed at least 85 people and destroyed the town of Paradise.

The danger on Maui was well known. Maui County's hazard mitigation plan updated in 2020 identified Lahaina and other West Maui communities as having frequent wildfires and several buildings at risk. The report also noted West Maui had the island's second-highest rate of households without a vehicle and the highest rate of non-English speakers.

"This may limit the population's ability to receive, understand and take expedient action during hazard events," the plan stated.

Maui's firefighting efforts may have been hampered by limited staff and equipment.

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Bobby Lee, president of the Hawaii Firefighters Association, said there are a maximum of 65 county firefighters working at any given time with responsibility for three islands: Maui, Molokai and Lanai.

The department has about 13 fire engines and two ladder trucks, but no off-road vehicles to thoroughly attack brush fires before they reach roads or populated areas, he said.

Maui water officials warned Kula and Lahaina residents not to drink running water, which may be contaminated even after boiling, and to only take short, lukewarm showers in well-ventilated rooms to avoid possible chemical vapor exposure.

Andrew Whelton, a Purdue University engineering professor whose team assisted with the Camp Fire and Colorado's 2021 Marshall Fire, said showering in water potentially containing hazardous waste levels of benzene is not advisable and a do-not-use order would be appropriate until analysis is complete.

Lahaina resident Lana Vierra, who filled out FEMA assistance forms Friday at a relative's house, fled Tuesday and was eager to return, despite knowing the home where she raised five children and treasured items like baby pictures and yearbooks were gone.

"To actually stand there on your burnt grounds and get your wheels turning on how to move forward — I think it will give families that peace," she said.

Riley Curran said he fled his Front Street home after climbing up a neighboring building to get a better look. He doubts county officials could have done more due to the speed of the onrushing flames.

"It's not that people didn't try to do anything," Curran said. "The fire went from 0 to 100."

Curran had seen horrendous wildfires growing up in California, but "I've never seen one eat an entire town in four hours."

## **The failed Ohio amendment reflects Republican efforts nationally to restrict direct democracy**

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — After Ohio voters repealed a law pushed by Republicans that would have limited unions' collective bargaining rights in 2011, then-GOP Gov. John Kasich was contrite.

"I've heard their voices, I understand their decision and, frankly, I respect what people have to say in an effort like this," he told reporters after the defeat.

The tone from Ohio Republicans was much different this past week after voters resoundingly rejected their attempt to impose hurdles on passing amendments to the state constitution — a proposal that would have made it much more difficult to pass an abortion rights measure in November.

During an election night news conference, Republican Senate President Matt Huffman vowed to use the powers of his legislative supermajority to bring the issue back soon, variously blaming out-of-state dark money, unsupportive fellow Republicans, a lack of time and the issue's complexity for its failure.

He never mentioned respecting the will of the 57% of Ohio voters across both Democratic and Republican counties who voted "no" on the Republican proposal.

The striking contrast illustrates an increasing antagonism among elected Republicans across the country toward the nation's purest form of direct democracy — the citizen-initiated ballot measure — as it threatens their lock on power in states where they control the legislature.

Historically, attempts to undercut the citizen ballot initiative process have come from both parties, said Daniel A. Smith, a political science professor at the University of Florida.

"It has to do with which party is in monopolistic control of state legislatures and the governorship," he said. "When you have that monopoly of power, you want to restrict the voice of a statewide electorate that might go against your efforts to control the process."

According to a recent report by the nonpartisan Fairness Project, Ohio and five other states where Republicans control the legislature — Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Missouri and North Dakota — have either passed, attempted to pass or are currently working to pass expanded supermajority requirements for voters to approve statewide ballot measures.

At least six states, including Ohio, have sought to increase the number of counties where signatures

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must be gathered.

The group found that at least six of the 24 states that allow ballot initiatives have prohibited out-of-state petition circulators and nine have prohibited paid circulators altogether, the group reports.

Eighteen states have required circulators to swear oaths that they've seen every signature put to paper. Arkansas has imposed background checks on circulators. South Dakota has dictated such a large font size on petitions that it makes circulating them cumbersome.

Sarah Walker, policy and legal advocacy director for the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, said Republicans in Ohio and elsewhere are restricting the ballot initiative process in an era of renewed populism that's not going their way. She said conservatives had no interest in amending the ballot initiative process when they were winning campaigns in the 1990s and early 2000s.

"Since then, you've seen left-leaning organizations really developing their organizational skills and starting to win," she said. "The reason given for restricting the ballot initiative is often to insulate the state from outside special interests. But if lawmakers are interested in limiting that, there are things they can do legislatively to restrict those groups, and I don't see them having any interest in doing that."

Aggressive stances by Republican supermajorities at the Ohio Statehouse — including supporting one of the nation's most stringent abortion bans, refusing to pass many of a GOP governor's proposed gun control measures in the face of a deadly mass shooting, and repeatedly producing unconstitutional political maps — have motivated would-be reformers.

That prompted an influential mix of Republican politicians, anti-abortion and gun rights organizations and business interests in the state to push forward with Tuesday's failed amendment, which would have raised the threshold for passing future constitutional changes from a simple majority to a 60% supermajority.

Another example is Missouri, where Republicans plan to try again to raise the threshold to amend that state's constitution during the legislative session that begins in 2024 — after earlier efforts have failed.

Those plans come in a state where state lawmakers refused to fund a Medicaid expansion approved by voters until forced to by a court order, and where voters enshrined marijuana in the constitution last fall after lawmakers failed to. An abortion rights question is headed to Missouri's 2024 ballot.

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose is among Republicans in the state who cast Issue 1 as a fight against out-of-state special interests, although both sides of the campaign were heavily funded by such groups.

He called the \$20 million special election "only one battle in a long war."

"Unfortunately," he said, "we were dramatically outspent by dark money billionaires from California to New York, and the giant 'for sale' sign still hangs on Ohio's constitution," said LaRose, who is running for U.S. Senate in 2024.

Fairness Project Executive Director Kelly Hall said Ohio Republicans' promise to come back with another attempt to restrict the initiative process "says more about representational democracy than it does about direct democracy."

She rejected the narrative that out-of-state special interests are using the avenue of direct democracy to force unpopular policies into state constitutions, arguing corporate influence is far greater on state lawmakers.

"The least out-of-state venue is direct democracy, because then millions of Ohioans are participating, not just the several dozen who are receiving campaign contributions from corporate PACs, who are receiving perks and meetings and around-the-clock influence from corporate PACs," she said.

"Ballot measures enable issues that matter to working families to actually get on the agenda in a state, rather than the agenda being set by those who can afford lobbyists and campaign contributions."

## The Pentagon plans to shake up DC's National Guard, criticized for its response to protests, Jan. 6

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon is developing plans to restructure the National Guard in Washington, D.C., in a move to address problems highlighted by the chaotic response to the Jan. 6 riot and safety

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breaches during the 2020 protests over the murder of George Floyd, The Associated Press has learned.

The changes under discussion would transfer the District of Columbia's aviation units, which came under sharp criticism during the protests when a helicopter flew dangerously low over a crowd. In exchange, the district would get more military police, which is often the city's most significant need, as it grapples with crowd control and large public events.

Several current and former officials familiar with the talks spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations. They said no final decisions have been made.

A key sticking point is who would be in control of the D.C. Guard — a politically divisive question that gets to the heart of what has been an ongoing, turbulent issue. Across the country, governors control their National Guard units and can make decisions on deploying them to local disasters and other needs. But D.C. is not a state, so the president is in charge but gives that authority to the defense secretary, who generally delegates it to the Army secretary.

According to officials, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is weighing two options: maintaining the current system or handing control to U.S. Northern Command, which is in charge of homeland defense.

Senior officials have argued in favor of Northern Command, which would take control out of the hands of political appointees in Washington who may be at odds with the D.C. government, and giving it to nonpartisan military commanders who already oversee homeland defense. Others, however, believe the decision-making should remain at the Pentagon, mirroring the civilian control that governors have on their troops.

The overall goal, officials said, is not to decrease the size of the district's Guard, but reform it and ensure it has the units, equipment and training to do the missions it routinely faces. The proposal to shift the aviation forces is largely an Army decision. It would move the D.C. Air Guard wing and its aircraft to the Maryland Guard, and the Army aviation unit, with its helicopters, to Virginia's Guard.

An Army official added that a review of the D.C. Guard examined its ability to provide rapid response, mission command and coordination with other forces when needed over the past four years. The review, which led to the recommendations, involved the District Guard and Army leaders.

D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser's office did not respond to a request for comment Friday on the proposed changes.

But Bowser and other local officials have long claimed that the mayor's office should have sole authority to deploy the local guard, arguing that the D.C. mayor has the responsibilities of any governor without the extra authorities or tools.

When faced with a potential security event, the mayor of D.C. has to go to the Pentagon — usually the Army secretary — to request National Guard assistance. That was true during the violent protests in the city over the killing of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer in 2020, and later as an angry mob stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, in an effort to overturn the election of Joe Biden as president.

As the Jan. 6 riot was unfolding, city leaders were making frantic calls to Army leaders, asking them to send Guard troops to the Capitol where police and security were being overrun. City leaders complained heatedly about delays in the response as the Pentagon considered Bowser's National Guard request. City police ended up reinforcing the Capitol Police.

Army leaders, in response, said the district was demanding help but not providing the details and information necessary to determine what forces were needed and how they would be used.

Army officials were concerned about taking the Guard troops who were arrayed around the city doing traffic duty and sending them into a riot, because they were not prepared and didn't have appropriate gear. And they criticized the city for repeatedly insisting it would not need security help when asked by federal authorities in the days leading up to Jan. 6.

The swirling confusion spurred congressional hearings and accusations that political considerations influenced the Trump administration's response to the unrest in the Democratic-majority city. Defense officials rejected those charges, and blamed the city.

Within the Pentagon, however, there are broader concerns that D.C. is too quick to seek National Guard



troops to augment law enforcement shortfalls in the city that should be handled by police. In recent days, a city council member suggested the D.C. Guard might be needed to help battle spiking local crime.

The restructuring is an effort to smooth out the process and avoid communications problems if another crisis erupts.

An Army investigation in April 2021 sharply criticized the D.C. Guard, saying troops lacked clear guidance and didn't fully understand how to use helicopters appropriately during the civil unrest in June 2020.

The probe was triggered by widespread objections, including from Congress, after one of the D.C. Guard helicopters hovered low enough over protesters near the Capitol One Arena to create a deafening noise and spray protesters with rotor wash. There were also concerns that the Guard used a medivac helicopter — with medical markings — to make such a "show of force" against the crowds gathered to protest Floyd's death.

The report found that the use of medical helicopters was appropriate because it was an emergency, but the episode raised worries among defense leaders about the need for improved planning, training and oversight of the D.C. Guard's use of aviation and calls for a stricter approval process.

## **In deadly Maui wildfires, communication failed. Chaos overtook Lahaina along with the flames**

By REBECCA BOONE, JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER and AUDREY MCAVOY Associated Press

WAILUKU, Hawaii (AP) — In the hours before a wildfire engulfed the town of Lahaina, Maui County officials failed to activate sirens that would have warned the entire population of the approaching flames and instead relied on a series of sometimes confusing social media posts that reached a much smaller audience.

Power and cellular outages for residents further stymied communication efforts. Radio reports were scarce, some survivors reported, even as the blaze began to consume the town. Road blocks then forced fleeing drivers onto one narrow downtown street, creating a bottleneck that was quickly surrounded by flames on all sides. At least 80 people have been confirmed dead so far.

The silent sirens have raised questions about whether everything was done to alert the public in a state that possesses an elaborate emergency warning system for a variety of dangers including wars, volcanoes, hurricanes and wildfires.

Hector Bermudez left his apartment at Lahaina Shores shortly after 4:30 p.m. Tuesday after the smell of smoke woke him up from a nap. He asked his neighbor if he was also leaving.

"He said, 'No, I am waiting for the authorities to see what they are going to do,'" Bermudez recounted. "And I said, 'No, no no, please go. This smoke is going to kill us. You have to go. Please. You gotta get out of here. Don't wait for nobody.'"

His neighbor, who is about 70 and has difficulty walking, refused.

Bermudez doesn't know if he survived.

Officials with Maui's Emergency Management Agency did not immediately respond Friday to questions about sirens and other communications issues.

Hawaii's Attorney General Anne Lopez said her office will be conducting a comprehensive review of decision-making and standing policies surrounding the wildfires.

"My Department is committed to understanding the decisions that were made before and during the wildfires and to sharing with the public the results of this review," she said in a statement Friday, adding that "now is the time to begin this process of understanding."

The Associated Press created a timeline of the wildfires, using information from multiple sources including the county's announcements, state and local Emergency Management Alerts and interviews with officials and survivors.

The timeline shows public updates on the fires were spotty and often vague, and much of the county's attention was focused on another dangerous, larger fire in Upcountry Maui that was threatening neighborhoods in Kula. It shows no indication that county officials ever activated the region's all-hazard siren system, and reveals other emergency alerts were scarce.



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In the hours before the wildfires began, however, warnings about high winds were frequent and widely disseminated by the county and other agencies. A hurricane passing far to the south was expected to bring gusts of up to 65 mph (105 kph), residents were told on Monday.

The Upcountry fire started first, reported not long after midnight on Tuesday, and the first evacuations near Kula followed.

The fire near Lahaina started later, around 6:37 a.m. Tuesday. Some homes in Lahaina's most inland neighborhood were evacuated, but by 9:55 a.m. the county reported that the fire was fully contained. Still, the announcement included another warning that high winds would remain a concern for the next 24 hours.

The power also went out early that morning, leaving several thousand customers in the Lahaina/West Maui region and Upcountry without electricity. Several downed power lines required repair.

By 11 a.m., firefighting crews from several towns and the Hawaii Department of Lands had converged on the Upcountry fire, but wind gusts reaching 80 mph (129 kph) made conditions unsafe for helicopters. At 3:20 p.m., more Upcountry neighborhoods were evacuated.

The Lahaina fire, meanwhile, had escaped containment and forced the closure of the Lahaina Bypass road by 3:30 p.m. The announcement, however, didn't make it into a county fire update until 4:45 p.m. and didn't show up on the county Facebook page until nearly 5 p.m., when survivors say flames were surrounding the cars of families trapped downtown.

But while the Lahaina fire was spreading, Maui County and Hawaii Emergency Management Agency officials were making other urgent announcements — including a Facebook post about additional evacuations near the Upcountry fire and an announcement that the acting governor had issued an emergency proclamation.

In the Upcountry evacuation Facebook post at 3:20 p.m., Fire Assistant Chief Jeff Giese said an ominous warning.

"The fire can be a mile or more from your house, but in a minute or two, it can be at your house," Giese said.

Mike Cicchino lived below the Lahaina Bypass in one of Lahaina's more inland neighborhoods. He went to his house at 3:30 p.m. and minutes later realized his neighborhood was quickly being enveloped by flames.

He yelled to the neighbor kids to get their mom and leave. He ran inside to collect his wife and the dogs they were watching. Cicchino, along with others in the neighborhood, then jumped in their cars to leave. He listened for announcements on his car radio, but said there was essentially no information.

The government's social media attention turned from Upcountry back to Lahaina at 4:29 p.m., when Hawaii EMA posted on X (formerly Twitter) that the local Maui EMA had announced an immediate evacuation for an inland subdivision in Lahaina. Residents were directed to shelter at the Lahaina Civic Center on the north side of town.

Just before 5 p.m., Maui County shared a new Lahaina fire report on Facebook: "Flareup forces Lahaina Bypass road closure; shelter in place encouraged."

Many were already running from the flames. Lynn Robison evacuated from her apartment near the waterfront's Front Street at 4:33 p.m.

"There was no warning. There was absolutely none. Nobody came around. We didn't see a fire truck or anybody," Robison said.

Lana Vierra left her neighborhood about a mile (less than 2 kilometers) away around the same time. Her boyfriend had stopped by and told her he'd seen the approaching fire on the drive.

"He told me straight, 'People are going to die in this town; you gotta get out,'" she recalled. There had been no sirens, no alerts on her cellphone, she said.

But access to the main highway — the only road leading in and out of Lahaina — was cut off by barricades set up by authorities. The roadblocks forced people directly into harm's way, funneling cars onto Front Street.

"All the locals were pigeonholed into Lahaina in that corner there, and I felt like the county put us into a death trap," Cicchino said.

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Nathan Baird and his family escaped by driving past a barricade, he told Canadian Broadcaster CBC Radio. "Traffic was all over the place. Nobody knew where to go. They were trying to make everybody go up to the Civic Center and ... it just didn't make sense to me," Baird said. "I was so confused. At first, I was like, 'Why are all these people driving towards the fire?'"

Cicchino and his wife became trapped by walls of flame as Front Street burned. They ran for the ocean, spending hours crouching behind the sea wall or treading water in the choppy waves, depending on which area felt safest as the ever-changing fire raged.

At 5:20 p.m., Maui County shared another Lahaina fire update on Facebook: Evacuations in one subdivision were continuing, but access to the main highway was back open.

The U.S. Coast Guard's first notification about the fires was when the search and rescue command center in Honolulu received reports of people in the water near Lahaina at 5:45 p.m., said Capt. Aja Kirksy, commander of Coast Guard Sector Honolulu.

The boats were hard to see because of the smoke, but Cicchino and others used cellphones to flash lights at the vessels, guiding them in.

Cicchino helped load children into the Coast Guard boats, and at one point loaned his cellphone — which had been stashed in his wife's waterproof pouch — to a member of the guard so they could contact fire crews. He said the rescue took hours, and he and his wife were finally brought out of Lahaina around 1 a.m. Wednesday.

Maui County Facebook posts around 8:40 p.m. Tuesday urged residents in the surrounding area who weren't impacted by the fires to shelter in place, and said smoke was forcing more road closures. A commenter pointed out the communication problems just before 9 p.m. "You do realize that all communication to Lahaina is cut off and nobody can get in touch with anyone on that side," the commenter wrote.

Riley Curran, who fled his Lahaina home after climbing up a neighboring apartment building to get a better look at the fire, doesn't think there is anything the county could have done.

"It's not that people didn't try to do anything. It's that it was so fast no one had time to do anything," Curran said. "The fire went from 0 to 100."

But Cicchino said it all felt like the county wasn't prepared and government agencies weren't communicating with each other.

"I feel like the county really cost a lot of peoples' lives and homes that day. I felt like a lot of this could have been prevented if they just thought about this stuff in the morning, and took their precaution," he said. "You live in a fire zone. They have a lot of fires. You need to prepare for fires."

The all-hazard sirens are tested each month to ensure they are in working order. During the most recent test, Aug. 1, they malfunctioned in three separate incidents in three counties. Maui's siren tone was too short, so officials repeated the test later that day, successfully.

Karl Kim directs the National Disaster Preparedness Training Center, a University of Hawaii-based organization that develops training materials to help officials respond to natural disasters.

Kim said it's too soon to know exactly how the warning and alert system might have saved more lives in Lahaina, and noted that wildfires are often more challenging to manage than volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and even earthquakes because they are more difficult to detect and track over time.

"I think it's a wake-up call," he said. "We have to invest more in understanding of wildfires and the threats that they provide, which aren't as well understood."

## Damar Hamlin set to take next step in comeback bid in Bills' preseason game against Colts

By JOHN WAWROW AP Sports Writer

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. (AP) — Damar Hamlin has reached another major milestone in his return to football.

The Bills safety was scheduled to suit up and play in Buffalo's preseason opener against the Indianapolis Colts on Saturday. The game will mark the first time Hamlin has appeared in a competitive setting since going into cardiac arrest and needing to be resuscitated on the field during a game at Cincinnati on Jan. 2.

What seemed unfathomable in those frightening first moments, and the nine-day stay in two hospitals that followed, has become a reality for the 25-year-old Hamlin, who put his fears aside in April by announcing his intention to resume his playing career after being medically cleared to return.

In that time, the Bills have eased Hamlin back on the field, starting with him taking part in individual drills in May, followed by team drills a week later. Two weeks ago, the third-year safety took another major step by experiencing his first thud of a hit in the Bills' first full-padded practice of training camp.

"I made the choice to play. But I'm processing a thousand emotions. I'm not afraid to say that it crosses my mind of being a little scared here and there," Hamlin said at the time. "My faith is stronger than any fear. That's what I want to preach up here. And that's the message I want to spread on to the world that as long as your faith is stronger than your fear, you can get through anything."

Hamlin said it was too early to look ahead to the preseason because he wanted to stay in the moment. He'll get his chance on Saturday, with coach Sean McDermott telling the AP that Hamlin is scheduled to play.

And Hamlin will have rooting support on the opposite sideline.

Receiver Isaiah McKenzie, who signed with the Colts this offseason after spending the previous four-plus years in Buffalo, has already arranged to exchange jerseys with Hamlin following the game.

After two more preseason games, Hamlin's next hurdle will come on Aug. 29, when the Bills make their final cuts to establish their regular-season roster.

Hamlin has displayed no signs of a setback or hesitation during training camp in seeking to re-secure one of the backup spots behind returning starters Micah Hyde and Jordan Poyer.

## **Russian Orthodox priests face persecution from state and church for supporting peace in Ukraine**

By KOSTYA MANENKOV The Associated Press

ANTALYA, Turkey (AP) — Standing in an old Orthodox church in Antalya with a Bible in one hand and a candle in the other, the Rev. Ioann Koval led one of his first services in Turkey after Russian Orthodox Church leadership decided to defrock him following his prayer for peace in Ukraine.

Last September, when President Vladimir Putin ordered a partial mobilization of reservists, Moscow Patriarch Kirill required his clergymen to pray for victory. Standing in front of the altar and dozens of his parishioners in one of Moscow's churches, Koval decided to put the peace above the patriarch's orders.

"With the word 'victory' the prayer acquired a propagandistic meaning, shaping the correct thinking among the parishioners, among the clergy, what they should think about and how they should see these hostilities," Koval said. "It went against my conscience. I couldn't submit to this political pressure from the hierarchy."

In the prayer he recited multiple times, the 45-year-old priest changed just one word, replacing "victory" with "peace" — but it was enough for the church court to remove his priestly rank.

Publicly praying or calling for peace also poses risks of prosecution from the Russian state. Shortly after Russian troops invaded Ukraine, lawmakers passed legislation that allowed prosecuting thousands of people for "discrediting the Russian army," a charge that in reality applies to anything that contradicts the official narrative, be it a commentary on social networks or a prayer in church.

Similar to Putin's authoritarian regime, Kirill built a harsh hierarchy in the church that demands total conformity, Andrey Desnitsky, professor of philology at Vilnius University in Lithuania, told The Associated Press. If a priest refuses to read the patriarch's prayer, his loyalty is suspect.

"If you are not loyal, then there is no place for you in church," added Desnitsky, a longtime expert on the Russian church.

When the war started, most priests remained silent, fearing pressure from the church and state authorities; only a small fraction have spoken out. Of more than 40,000 clergymen in the Russian Orthodox Church, only 300 priests signed a public letter calling for peace in Ukraine.

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But each of the public voices against the war is crucial, said Natallia Vasilevich, the coordinator for the human rights group Christians Against War.

"It breaks what seems to be a monolithic position of the Russian Orthodox Church," she told AP.

Since the beginning of the war, Vasilevich's team has counted at least 30 Orthodox priests who faced pressure by religious or state authorities. But there might be even more cases, she says, as some priests are afraid to talk about repressions, fearing it will bring more.

The Russian Orthodox Church explains the repressions against the priests who spoke against the war are punishment for their so-called engagement in politics.

"The clergy who turn themselves from priests into political agitators and persons participating in the political struggle, they, obviously, cease to fulfill their pastoral duty and are subject to canonical bans," Vakhtang Kipshidze, the deputy head of the church's press service, told AP.

At the same time, the priests who publicly support the war in Ukraine do not face any repercussions and moreover are supported by the state, Vasilevich said.

"The Russian regime is interested in making these voices sound louder," she added.

The priests who refuse to join this chorus or stay quiet can be reassigned, temporarily relieved of their duties, or defrocked — losing their salary, housing, benefits, and most importantly their ministries to their flock.

"I never questioned the choice I made," Koval said. "I, my whole soul, my whole being opposed this war. It was impossible for me to support the invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine with my prayer."

After a Russian Orthodox Church court decided he should be defrocked, Koval appealed to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, who has asserted a right to receive petitions of appeal from other Orthodox churches' clergy, over Russia's objections.

In June, the Constantinople patriarchate decided that Koval was punished for his stance on the war in Ukraine and ruled to restore his holy rank. The same day, Bartholomew allowed him to serve in his churches.

The Rev. Ioann Burdin also wanted to leave the Russian Orthodox Church after he spoke out against the war at a small church near Kostroma and the local court fined him for discrediting the Russian army. He asked the patriarch to approve his transfer to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church but instead, Kirill banned him from service until the priest made a public apology.

"My position, which I first stated on the website, then in the church, and later during the trial was an expression of my religious convictions," the priest told AP. "Since all people are brothers, then any war, any military conflict, one way or another becomes fratricidal."

Not allowed to serve in the church, Burdin brought his sermons to a Telegram channel where he guides Orthodox Christians confused by the patriarch's support of the war.

During his more than two decades in power, Putin has massively boosted the Russian Orthodox Church's standing, increasing its prestige, wealth and power in society after decades of oppression or indifference under Soviet leaders.

In turn, its leaders, like Patriarch Kirill, have supported his initiatives. The church has thrown its weight behind the war in Ukraine and it has been commonplace to see its clergymen blessing troops and equipment heading into battle and invoking God's blessings in the campaign.

The Rev. Iakov Vorontsov, a priest in Kazakhstan, was shocked and desperate when he first heard the news of the war. He was hoping the church would step in to mediate the conflict. But neither his peers nor his superiors supported his calls to preach peace.

"I realized that no one hears the words about peace," the 37-year-old priest says. "It should have been conveyed to the people, to our flock, but it was not. And then I realized that I have another tool: social networks."

While his anti-war posts on Facebook received support online, the offline reaction was hostile. His superiors reassigned him several times, forbade him from giving sermons, and told parishioners to stay away from him. In the end, the priest lost hope and decided to temporarily stop serving in the Russian Orthodox Church.



"They wanted me to leave, and in the end, they got it," the priest says, sitting in his apartment without a black robe that he wore for the past 13 years. "But I didn't renounce my rank, I just decided for the time being that I can't be among these people in this situation."

The patriarch's influence goes far beyond the boundaries of his country and his orders apply even to priests serving abroad. In February, Kirill suspended for three months the Rev. Andrei Kordochkin, a priest at an Orthodox church in Madrid, for his anti-war stance.

Kipshidze said Kordochkin was punished for "inciting hatred" among his parishioners. But the priest says it's a warning to dissuade him from further criticism.

"I don't think that there is something that I have done wrong canonically," Kordochkin said. "If there is no canonical crime, then it means that canon law is simply used as a mechanism of political repression."

Since the first days of the war, Kordochkin has publicly condemned the Russian invasion and has been regularly praying for peace in Ukraine. He believes priests should not remain silent and must convey a Christian message to people.

"We have a duty to speak out, whatever the cost of that will be."

## **A cherished weekend flea market in the Ukrainian capital survives despite war**

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The Pochaina neighborhood in the Ukrainian capital comes alive every weekend as hundreds of people flock to its famous flea market, looking for finds.

Antique-hunters, collectors and many others look over seemingly endless rows of trinkets and time-worn wares. It's a dizzying array that includes Soviet-era relics such as decorative medals, ceramics with communist leaders' portraits, Cold War-era gas masks and military uniform items.

Despite Ukraine's ban on Soviet and Nazi symbols adopted in 2015 as a part of the country's effort to distance itself from its totalitarian past, vendors, buyers and law enforcement all seem undisturbed by such historic relics being openly sold.

"It's purely business, there are no (USSR) sympathizers around here. Items like this are in high demand," says Kristian Zander, a 49-year-old market vendor, pointing at the "Buying USSR relics" sign at his stand. On display are kitchenware and utensils, hunting knives, Soviet badges and bottle openers.

The market has survived the Russia-Ukraine war, even with the disappearance of tourists and the decreasing purchasing power of most Ukrainians.

Despite more and more buyers having to tighten their belts, the market still offers a large and eclectic variety of goods to those with any money to spend. A single vendor may sell items including almost-vintage VHS tapes, World War II dishware, manicure scissors, brand-name sneaker knockoffs, decades-old lingerie, broken multimedia players and cracked guitars. The vendor often hopes to sell the wares for pennies before they go to waste.

## **New fire prompts evacuation as survivors of Maui's wildfires return after death toll rises to 67**

By CLAIRE RUSH, TY O'NEIL and JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER Associated Press

LAHAINA, Hawaii (AP) — A new fire burning on the Hawaii island of Maui on Friday night triggered the evacuation of a community to the northeast of the area that burned earlier this week, police said.

The fire prompted the evacuation of people in Kaanapali in West Maui, the Maui Police Department announced on social media. No details of the evacuation were immediately provided.

Traffic was halted earlier after some people went over barricaded, closed-off areas of the disaster zone and "entered restricted, dangerous, active investigation scenes," police said.

The number of confirmed deaths from the Maui wildfires this week has increased to 67.

Maui residents had already started returning to their neighborhoods to find blackened hulks of burned-out cars, the pavement streaked with melted and then rehardened chrome. Block after block of flattened



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homes and businesses. Incinerated telephone poles, and elevator shafts rising from ashy lots where apartment buildings once stood. A truck bed full of glass bottles, warped into surreal shapes by the furious heat.

Anthony Garcia assessed the devastation as he stood under historic Lahaina's iconic banyan tree, now charred, and swept twisted branches into neat piles next to another heap filled with dead animals — cats, roosters and other birds killed by the smoke and flames. Somehow it made sense in a world turned upside-down.

"If I don't do something, I'll go nuts," said Garcia, who lost everything he owned. "I'm losing my faith in God."

That was the scene residents found when they were allowed back home to take stock of their shattered homes and lives. The fire tore through parts of Maui and were still short of full containment and being battled by firefighters.

Attorney General Anne Lopez's office announced it will conduct a comprehensive review of decision-making and standing policies leading up to, during and after the wildfires.

"My Department is committed to understanding the decisions that were made before and during the wildfires and to sharing with the public the results of this review," Lopez said in a statement. "As we continue to support all aspects of the ongoing relief effort, now is the time to begin this process of understanding."

Associated Press journalists also witnessed the devastation, with nearly every building destroyed on Front Street, the heart of Lahaina and the economic hub of the island. Surviving roosters, which are known to roam Hawaii streets, meandered through the ashes, and there was an eerie traffic jam of charred cars that didn't escape the inferno.

"It hit so quick, it was incredible," resident Kyle Scharnhorst said as he surveyed his apartment complex's damage in the morning. "It was like a war zone."

The wildfires are the state's deadliest natural disaster in decades, surpassing a 1960 tsunami that killed 61 people. An even deadlier tsunami in 1946, which killed more than 150 on the Big Island, prompted the development of the territory-wide emergency system that includes sirens, which are sounded monthly to test their readiness.

But many fire survivors said in interviews that they didn't hear any sirens or receive a warning that gave them enough time to prepare, realizing they were in danger only when they saw flames or heard explosions nearby.

"There was no warning. There was absolutely none. Nobody came around. We didn't see a fire truck or anybody," said Lynn Robinson, who lost her home.

Hawaii emergency management records show no indication that warning sirens sounded before people had to run for their lives. Instead, officials sent alerts to mobile phones, televisions and radio stations — but widespread power and cellular outages may have limited their reach.

Gov. Josh Green warned that the death toll would likely rise as search and rescue operations continue. Authorities set a curfew from 10 p.m. until 6 a.m. Saturday.

"The recovery's going to be extraordinarily complicated, but we do want people to get back to their homes and just do what they can to assess safely, because it's pretty dangerous," Green told Hawaii News Now.

Fueled by a dry summer and strong winds from a passing hurricane, at least three wildfires erupted on Maui this week, racing through parched brush covering the island.

The most serious one swept into Lahaina on Tuesday and left it a grid of gray rubble wedged between the blue ocean and lush green slopes. Skeletal remains of buildings bowed under roofs that pancaked in the blaze. Palm trees were torched, boats in the harbor were scorched and the stench of burning lingered.

The wildfire is already projected to be the second-costliest disaster in Hawaii history, behind only Hurricane Iniki in 1992, according to calculations by Karen Clark & Company, a prominent disaster and risk modeling company.

Summer and Gilles Gerling sought to salvage keepsakes from the ashes of their home. But all they could find was the piggy bank Summer Gerling's father gave her as a child, their daughter's jade bracelet and the watches they gifted each other for their wedding.

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Their wedding rings were gone.

They described their fear as the strong wind whipped the smoke and flames closer. But they said they were just happy that they and their two children made it out alive.

"It is what it is," Gilles Gerling said. "Safety was the main concern. These are all material things."

Cadaver-sniffing dogs were brought in to assist the search for the dead, Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen Jr. said.

The wildfire is the deadliest in the U.S. since the 2018 Camp Fire in California, which killed at least 85 people and laid waste to the town of Paradise.

Lahaina's wildfire risk is well known. Maui County's hazard mitigation plan, last updated in 2020, identified Lahaina and other West Maui communities as having frequent wildfires and a large number of buildings at risk of wildfire damage.

The report also noted that West Maui had the island's second-highest rate of households without a vehicle and the highest rate of non-English speakers.

"This may limit the population's ability to receive, understand and take expedient action during hazard events," the plan noted.

Maui's firefighting efforts may also have been hampered by a small staff, said Bobby Lee, president of the Hawaii Firefighters Association. There are a maximum of 65 firefighters working at any given time in the county, and they are responsible for three islands — Maui, Molokai and Lanai — he said.

Those crews have about 13 fire engines and two ladder trucks, but the department does not have any off-road vehicles, he said. That means crews can't attack brush fires thoroughly before they reach roads or populated areas.

Maui water officials warned residents in Kula and Lahaina who have running water that it may be contaminated and they should not drink it — even after boiling — and should take only short, lukewarm showers "in a well-ventilated room" to avoid exposure to possible chemical vapors.

But Andrew Whelton, an engineering professor at Purdue University whose team was called in after the Camp Fire and the 2021 Marshall Fire in Colorado, said "showering in water that potentially contains hazardous waste levels of benzene is not advisable" and a do-not-use order would be appropriate until sampling and analysis have been done.

When she fled Tuesday, Lahaina resident Lana Vierra thought it would be temporary. She spent Friday morning filling out FEMA assistance forms at a relative's house in Haiku.

Though she knew the home where she raised five children was gone, along with treasured items like baby pictures and yearbooks, she was eager to return.

"To actually stand there on your burnt grounds and get your wheels turning on how to move forward — I think it will give families that peace," she said.

Riley Curran said he fled his home on Front Street after climbing up a neighboring apartment building to get a better look at the onrushing fire. He doubts county officials could have done more to stave off disaster, because it happened so fast.

"It's not that people didn't try to do anything. ... The fire went from 0 to 100," Curran said.

Curran added that he grew up in California and has seen horrendous wildfires, but "I've never seen one eat an entire town in four hours."

## How Vivek Ramaswamy is pushing — delicately — to win over Trump supporters

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

VAIL, Iowa (AP) — Republican presidential hopeful Vivek Ramaswamy was more than 40 minutes into a town hall in rural Iowa when a woman in the crowd posed a pointed question. Or perhaps it was a suggestion.

"I know you want to be president," she said. "But would you consider being Trump's vice president?"

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The query drew light laughter from attendees and a lengthy response from Ramaswamy. (The short answer: No.)

It also highlighted the central challenge facing the wealthy entrepreneur, who has risen from little-known newcomer to as high as third in some Republican primary polls since joining the race nearly six months ago. While voters are increasingly interested in Ramaswamy, it's former President Donald Trump who continues to be many conservatives' favorite.

With the first Republican primary debate in just over a week and the leadoff Iowa caucus five months away, he is delicately working to convince more voters that he could be their nominee and — as much as he says he respects Trump — would be a better 2024 candidate and president.

"The debate will be important, but I think also just continuing on the trajectory we've been on," Ramaswamy said after the town hall held in a cavernous welding company workshed in Vail, Iowa. He returns to Iowa on Saturday for the Iowa State Fair, a rite of passage for presidential candidates.

Ramaswamy described the months leading up to the first debate as "just the pre-season."

"So we're entering the regular season of this and I'm coming in with a running start," he said. "That's the way I look at it."

He says his strategy heading into the debate in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is "speak the truth," pointing to a banner emblazoned with the word "TRUTH" that serves as his backdrop and has become a campaign theme. The word — in all capital letters and a font and that resembles Trump campaign signage — is emblazoned on placards, T-shirts and stickers.

Ramaswamy says he and others cannot trust the government because the government doesn't tell the truth. It was what motivated him, he says, to travel to the courthouse where Trump was to appear on charges earlier this month to announce he is suing the Justice Department and seeking all records the department has with information about why Trump was indicted.

Though such a lawsuit is unlikely to be successful before any GOP primary votes are cast, it was a move that struck a balance between defending Trump and drawing positive attention to his own candidacy, at least among the Republican primary electorate.

"That's what this campaign is already all about, speaking the hard truths, the truth that you might speak at the dinner table, but you don't feel free to speak in public," Ramaswamy told the Iowa audience. If he is elected, he said, people will speak those truths again, such as "God is real" and "reverse racism is racism."

Having just turned 38, Ramaswamy is the youngest person to be a major Republican presidential candidate. Born in Ohio to immigrant parents from India, he earned a biology degree from Harvard University and then finished Yale Law School.

He made his fortune after starting a biotech company, last year founded an asset management firm and is the author of several books, including "Woke, Inc." His books helped Ramaswamy gain exposure in conservative circles, including on Fox News, as a critic of "ESG," or looking not just at profit in investments, but also at environmental, social and governance issues, such as a company's policies on climate. He bemoans that the United States has become a place full of "victims," and says the country has lost its purpose and its focus on faith, patriotism, hard work and family.

On the stump, Ramaswamy is able to wax on issues ranging from digital currency to his stance on Israel, the U.S. Constitution and the civil service rules regarding mass layoffs of federal employees — rules he says he understands better than any other candidate. He is proud of not needing a teleprompter, and his mix of policy specifics and smooth delivery has won over some voters.

"He's a great orator, he has a keen intellect and a lot of knowledge," said Margarite Goodenow, a retiree from Council Bluffs who said she is so far supporting Ramaswamy over Trump. She described the former president as "too toxic" — a position she held before he was indicted in multiple criminal cases — though Goodenow said she will support Trump if he is the nominee.

Ramaswamy says he can use his deep knowledge to accomplish what Trump couldn't and his other rivals wouldn't be able to — laying off 75% of the federal "bureaucracy" in his first term, including 50% in year one.

Some 20,000 members of the FBI would be let go as he dismantles the agency, he said. The remaining

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15,000 frontline agents would go to work for what he says are more effective agencies, such as the U.S. Marshals Service, to focus on crimes such as child sex trafficking. He also said that by March 31, 2025, he would station the military along the U.S.-Mexico border — positioned every half-mile — to protect against illegal immigration and drugs like fentanyl entering the country.

Those proposals all brought cheers during his recent Iowa stops.

Kelly and Amy Pieper were among the nearly 200 people — hailing from more than eight counties, according to organizers — who turned out for the Ramaswamy town hall in in the northwest Iowa community of Vail, which has a population of fewer than 400. They liked that Ramaswamy would carry forward many of Trump's policies, but presents himself as more eloquent and optimistic.

"He gives you a sense of hope, not all doom and gloom," Kelly Pieper said.

"It's like he's got Trump ideals but is a more eloquent version. Not this crazy uncle talking," his wife, Amy Pieper, added. "That's what we need."

Not everyone is convinced he can pull it off, however, even if Iowa has been known to provide some surprises.

For Republicans, Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum lodged an unexpected 2012 victory, though he later lost the GOP primary to Mitt Romney. On the Democratic side, it was then-Sen. Barack Obama whose 2008 defeat of Hillary Clinton threw that nomination battle into question. And in 2020, Pete Buttigieg, whose highest office was mayor of South Bend, Indiana, finished atop the field alongside Sen. Bernie Sanders. Joe Biden later won the nomination and defeated Trump.

That has set up the rare presidential race with a former office holder seeking reelection, making Trump a formidable opponent whose rallies attract thousands more people. Trump's closest challenger to be Republicans' nominee so far is Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has consistently polled a distant second, with Ramaswamy trailing.

Voters at the Ramaswamy events consistently said they were deciding between the two alternatives to Trump. But like the woman who intimated that Ramaswamy could be Trump's running mate, Andrew Grove has his doubts about whether the first-time candidate can pull it off.

"His message is on spot. I just don't know if he has the support to take him over the top, over Trump and DeSantis," said Grove, 53. He added that DeSantis is "a proven leader" while Ramaswamy has not held public office.

Ramaswamy maintains that he is the only candidate in the GOP field who can deliver the landslide victory that the country needs in 2024 — something akin to Ronald Reagan's wipeout of his 1984 rival — rather than the kind of tight race the nation saw in 2020. He says he is attracting support from young people and new donors that older candidates are not. Of his roughly 70,000 individual donors, he says, 40% of those making small-dollar contributions are giving to a Republican for the first time.

As for Trump, Ramaswamy responded to the question of being his running mate by speaking warmly of the former president. Ramaswamy was a "hardcore" supporter of the president in 2020, he said, adding that they talk "from time to time," had dinner together a few years ago and that if he becomes president, Trump probably would be his most useful adviser and mentor.

But he says the America First movement belongs not just to Trump but to "we the people." And he believes he can be more effective at accomplishing things Trump could not, saying a certain segment of the electorate automatically opposes Trump — through no fault of his own, he said.

"I'm not having that effect on people," Ramaswamy said.

He noted another key difference as he made his case to top the ticket.

"He's not the same person he was eight years ago," Ramaswamy said of Trump.

"I hope certainly and pray that my best days are ahead of me. And I think we might just want a U.S. president whose best days aren't behind him."



## What's behind the tentative US-Iran agreement involving prisoners and frozen funds

By JON GAMBRELL and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The United States and Iran reached a tentative agreement this week that will eventually see five detained Americans in Iran and an unknown number of Iranians imprisoned in the U.S. released from custody after billions of dollars in frozen Iranian assets are transferred from banks in South Korea to Qatar.

The complex deal — which came together after months of indirect negotiations between U.S. and Iranian officials — was announced on Thursday when Iran moved four of the five Americans from prison to house arrest. The fifth American had already been under house arrest.

Details of the money transfer, the timing of its completion and the ultimate release of both the American and Iranian prisoners remain unclear. However, U.S. and Iranian officials say they believe the agreement could be complete by mid- to late-September.

A look at what is known about the deal.

### WHAT'S IN IT?

Under the tentative agreement, the U.S. has given its blessing to South Korea to convert frozen Iranian assets held there from the South Korean currency, the won, to euros.

That money then would be sent to Qatar, a small, energy-rich nation on the Arabian Peninsula that has been a mediator in the talks. The amount from Seoul could be anywhere from \$6 billion to \$7 billion, depending on exchange rates. The cash represents money South Korea owed Iran — but had not yet paid — for oil purchased before the Trump administration imposed sanctions on such transactions in 2019.

The U.S. maintains that, once in Qatar, the money will be held in restricted accounts and will only be able to be used for humanitarian goods, such as medicine and food. Those transactions are currently allowed under American sanctions targeting the Islamic Republic over its advancing nuclear program.

Some in Iran have disputed the U.S. claim, saying that Tehran will have total control over the funds. Qatar has not commented publicly on how it will monitor the disbursement of the money.

In exchange, Iran is to release the five Iranian-Americans held as prisoners in the country. Currently, they are under guard at a hotel in Tehran, according to a U.S.-based lawyer advocating for one of them.

### WHY WILL IT TAKE SO LONG?

Iran does not want the frozen assets in South Korean won, which is less convertible than euros or U.S. dollars. U.S. officials say that while South Korea is on board with the transfer it is concerned that converting \$6 or \$7 billion in won into other currencies at once will adversely affect its exchange rate and economy.

Thus, South Korea is proceeding slowly, converting smaller amounts of the frozen assets for the eventual transfer to the central bank in Qatar. In addition, as the money is transferred, it has to avoid touching the U.S. financial system where it could become subject to American sanctions. So a complicated and time-consuming series of transfers through third-country banks has been arranged.

"We have worked extensively with the South Koreans on this and there's no impediment to the movement of the account from South Korea to Qatar," U.S. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said Friday.

In Doha, Qatar's Minister of State Mohammed Abdulaziz al-Khulaifi said, "What we have achieved in this agreement reflects the confidence of these parties in the State of Qatar as a neutral mediator and international partner in resolving international disputes by peaceful means." He did not address how the money would be policed.

### WHO ARE THE DETAINED IRANIAN-AMERICANS?

The identities of three of the five prisoners have been made public. It remains unclear who the other two are. The American government has described them as wanting to keep their identities private and Iran has not named them either.

The three known are Siamak Namazi, who was detained in 2015 and later sentenced to 10 years in prison on internationally criticized spying charges. Another is Emad Sharghi, a venture capitalist serving a 10-year sentence.

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The third is Morad Tahbaz, a British-American conservationist of Iranian descent who was arrested in 2018 and also received a 10-year sentence.

Those advocating for their release describe them as wrongfully detained and innocent. Iran has used prisoners with Western ties as bargaining chips in negotiations since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

WHY IS THIS DEAL HAPPENING NOW?

For Iran, years of American sanctions following former U.S. President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with world powers has crushed its already-anemic economy.

Previous claims of progress in talks over the frozen assets have provided only short-term boosts to Iran's hobbled rial currency.

The release of that money, even if only disbursed under strict circumstances, could provide an economic boost.

For the U.S., the administration of President Joe Biden has tried to get Iran back into the deal, which fell apart after Trump's 2018 withdrawal. Last year, countries involved in the initial agreement offered Tehran what was described as their last, best roadmap to restore the accord. Iran did not accept it.

Still, Iran hawks in Congress and outside critics of the 2015 nuclear deal have criticized the new arrangement. Former Vice President Mike Pence and the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Jim Risch, as well as former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have all compared the money transfer to paying a ransom and said the Biden administration is encouraging Iran to continue taking prisoners.

WILL THE U.S. RELEASE IRANIAN PRISONERS HELD IN AMERICA?

On Friday, Iran's Foreign Ministry made a point of bringing up those prisoners. American officials have declined to comment on who or how many Iranian prisoners might be released in a final agreement. But Iranian media in the past identified several prisoners with cases tied to violations of U.S. export laws and restrictions on doing business with Iran.

Those alleged violations include the transfer of money through Venezuela and sales of dual-use equipment that the U.S. says could be used in Iran's military and nuclear programs.

DOES THIS MEAN IRAN-U.S. TENSIONS ARE EASING?

No. Outside of the tensions over the nuclear deal and Iran's atomic ambitions, a series of attacks and ship seizures in the Mideast have been attributed to Tehran since 2019.

The Pentagon is considering a plan to put U.S. troops on board to guard commercial ships in the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20% of all oil shipments pass moving out of the Persian Gulf.

A major deployment of U.S. sailors and Marines, alongside F-35s, F-16s and other aircraft, is also underway in the region. Meanwhile, Iran supplies Russia with the bomb-carrying drones Moscow uses to target sites in Ukraine amid its war on Kyiv.

## Barrels of drinking water for migrants walking through Texas have disappeared

By VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

HEBBRONVILLE, Texas (AP) — As one of the worst heat waves on record set in across much of the southern United States this summer, authorities and activists in South Texas found themselves embroiled in a mystery in this arid region near the border with Mexico.

Barrels of life-saving water that a human rights group had strategically placed for wayward migrants traveling on foot had vanished.

Usually, they are hard to miss. Labeled with the word "AGUA" painted in white, capital letters and standing about waist-high, the 55-gallon (208-liter), blue drums stand out against the scrub and grass, turned from green to a sundried brown.

The stakes of solving this mystery are high.

Summer temperatures can climb to 110 degrees Fahrenheit (43.3 degrees Celsius) in Texas' sparsely

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populated Jim Hogg County, with its vast, inhospitable ranchlands. Migrants — and sometimes human smugglers — take a route through this county to try to circumvent a Border Patrol checkpoint on a busier highway about 30 miles (48 kilometers) to the east. More than 60 miles (96 kilometers) from the U.S.-Mexico border, it can take several days to walk there for migrants who may have already spent weeks crossing mountains and desert and avoiding cartel violence.

“We don’t have the luxury of losing time in what we do,” said Ruben Garza’s, an investigator with the Jim Hogg Sheriff’s Office. Tears streamed down his face as he recalled helping locate a missing migrant man who became overheated in the brush, called for help but died just moments after his rescue.

Exact counts of those who die are difficult to determine because deaths often go unreported. The U.N. International Organization for Migration estimates almost 3,000 migrants have died crossing from Mexico to the U.S. by drowning in Rio Grande, or because of lack of shelter, food or water.

Humanitarian groups started placing water for migrants in spots on the U.S. side of the border with Mexico in the 1990s after authorities began finding bodies of those who succumbed to the harsh conditions.

John Meza volunteers with the South Texas Human Rights Center in Jim Hogg County, where the population of about 5,000 people is spread over 1,100 square miles (2,850 square kilometers) — larger than the state of Rhode Island. He restocks the stations with gallon jugs of water, trims away overgrown grass, and ensures the GPS coordinates are still visible on the underside of the barrel lids.

On one of his rounds in July, Meza said, 12 of the 21 stations he maintains were no longer there.

The Associated Press compared images captured by Google Maps over the last two years and confirmed that some barrels that were once there were gone.

But to where?

Wildfires are common in this part of Texas, where dry grass quickly becomes fuel. Road construction crews frequently push or move aside obstructions for their work. But as Garza, the sheriff’s investigator, walked along a path designated by GPS coordinates for the barrels, there were no signs of melted, blue plastic. And nothing indicated the heavy barrels had been moved. Though volunteers fill them only part-way, they can weigh up to about 85 pounds (38 kilograms).

The investigator drove up and down the main highway where many of the water stations were installed near private property fence lines making note of the circumstances of each missing barrel.

Empty water bottles sat on the ground near the round impression left behind by the heavy barrel in one site. At another, the grass was trimmed, and fresh earth was laid bare to create buffers against fire.

Garza suspected state road crews moved three barrels that had been along an unpaved road, but the Texas Department of Transportation denied it. The investigator also noted a “tremendous amount” of wildfires could be to blame. He’s also speaking with area ranchers in hopes of showing the disappearances may be a simple misunderstanding, not a crime.

“They probably have a logical explanation,” he said, with no apparent lead.

But in other states along the southern border, missing water stations have been ascribed to spiteful intentions.

The group No More Deaths in 2018 released video of Border Patrol agents kicking over and pouring water out of gallon jugs left for people in the desert.

No More Deaths said that from 2012 to 2015, it found more than 3,586 gallon jugs of water that had been destroyed in an 800-square-mile (2,072-square-kilometer) desert area in southern Arizona.

Laura Hunter and her husband, John, started putting out water along popular smuggling routes in Southern California in the 1990s. They note their effort is not affiliated with political or religious groups, but that their work is often attacked.

“Every single year, we have vandalism, of course, you know, people that don’t agree with what we do,” Laura Hunter said.

The Hunters met with Eddie Canales, the executive director of the South Texas Human Rights Center, about 15 years ago and provided the design for the low-cost water stations. In light of the news, they offered some advice.

“I would replace them all with some used barrels, just replace them all,” John Hunter said. “And then I

would put a couple of cameras on those and get the guy's license plates and his face."

Canales said he plans to work with volunteers to replace the missing stations in the coming days.

The number of migrants crossing through South Texas and subsequent deaths decreased this year after President Joe Biden's administration instituted new border polices. A medical examiner's office who covers eleven counties including Jim Hogg has received the bodies of 85 migrants who died this year. It represents less than half the number sent to that office in 2022. Most of the migrants who died this year suffered fatal heat strokes.

But that could change, especially if legal challenges to the Biden administration's policies are successful.

For now, the mystery about the barrels' disappearance remains unsolved. But Meza, the volunteer who restocks the barrels in Jim Hogg County, plans to continue his work

"If that was intentional, that's a pretty malicious thing. You know what I mean?" Meza asked. "You're saying, 'Let these people die because I don't want to give them access to water.'"

## Developers have Black families fighting to maintain property and history

By JAMES POLLARD Associated Press/Report for America

PHILLIPS COMMUNITY, S.C. (AP) — The Rev. Elijah Smalls Jr. once grew okra, butter beans and other vegetables in the neighborhood where his family has lived near the South Carolina coast since not long after the Civil War. That was before new half-a-million-dollar homes in a nearby subdivision overwhelmed the drainage system.

Runoff meant for sewers now pools in the 80-year-old veteran's backyard, making gardening impossible.

Smalls and his relatives are among the many original families still living in historic settlement communities around Charleston. People who had been enslaved at Phillips Plantation bought patches of it to make their futures. Their descendants question whether the next generation can afford to stay.

"This is the only place I wanted to live and raise my family," said Fred Smalls, standing outside the home where his two sons grew up.

All along the South Carolina coast, land owned by the descendants of enslaved people is being targeted by developers looking to make money on vacation getaways and new homes. From Myrtle Beach south to Hilton Head, Black landowners who inherited property have been embroiled in disputes with investors looking to capitalize on rising real estate values.

State reforms approved in 2017 provided what supporters described as "shark repellent" — a law that made it harder for developers to strike deals below market prices with distant heirs who had long since moved away.

But skyrocketing property taxes are creating a growing burden as assessments rise. Younger family members may not qualify for homestead exemptions and other tax breaks. Elders worry that their family legacies — established by formerly enslaved ancestors who acquired land despite entrenched racism across the defeated South — are slipping away.

Most of the hundreds who still live on the remaining 450 acres or so of Phillips Community trace their lineage to the founders. Residents enjoy the pace of the South Carolina Lowcountry in the settlement communities, where neighbors have long taken care of each other.

"If we don't take steps to protect them, we're going to lose them parcel by parcel," said Coastal Conservation League Executive Director Faith Rivers James.

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Orange mesh fencing lines the dirt expanse of a new development site that encircles the ranch-style house where Josephine Wright has taken her stand. The 93-year-old woman is the matriarch of a family that has owned land on Hilton Head Island since Reconstruction.

"I'm being surrounded, really," Wright said recently in the Brooklyn accent she picked up before returning to her late husband's home 30 years ago in Jonesville Historic Gullah Neighborhood.

They wanted tranquility as his Parkinson's disease progressed. But gone is the lush greenery that once



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grew on 29 acres previously owned by other relatives bordering Wright's home. A Georgia-based developer, Bailey Point Investment, LLC, broke ground last summer on a 147-unit vacation rental complex there.

Managers of her family's trust failed to pay escalating tax bills. The land sold at a 2014 tax auction for just \$35,000 — a fraction of its current worth.

Then the investment company sued Wright, who owns her one acre separately. The company alleged that a corner of her screened-in porch, a shed and a satellite dish encroach on the construction project. A lawyer for the company did not return a call from The Associated Press.

She suspects they want to run her off, but she's not intimidated. NBA superstar Kyrie Irving and filmmaker Tyler Perry have lent their support. Town officials don't intend to issue building permits until the case is closed. She says other residents have thanked her for holding out.

She expected to spend these days in peace. Her small home remains the gathering spot for an extended family that includes 40 grandchildren, generations who she hopes will also enjoy the land.

"I just want to be able to live here in this sanctuary with a free mind," Wright said.

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The first self-governed town of formerly enslaved people in the United States was located on Hilton Head Island. Wright's neighborhood gets its name from a Black Civil War veteran named Caesar Jones who had escaped enslavement and purchased more than 100 acres himself, finding refuge in marshland that had been dismissed by colonists as unsuitable for farming.

It's hardly undesirable today. The advent of air conditioning helped make coastal land more appealing. New highways improved access to the coast, where population increases have made South Carolina the 10th fastest-growing state during the past decade.

Those searching for land found easy targets in the Gullah Geechee community, owned by descendants of West Africans who were forced into slavery on rice, indigo and cotton plantations along the Atlantic coast. They developed their unique culture on isolated islands, but their separation from the U.S. legal system left them vulnerable to exploitation.

Developers took advantage in many cases of what's known as heirs' property — land transferred from generation to generation without a will and shared equally by part-owners whose numbers balloon with each branch in the family tree. South Carolina developers could buy a single heir's interest and wind up taking everything from outmatched families suddenly navigating an unwieldy system.

Heirs' property is under threat throughout the Black Belt. Roughly 5 million acres over 11 states worth almost \$42 billion collectively remains trapped in cloudy titles, according to the most conservative estimates from a 2023 study led by rural sociologist Ryan Thomson at Auburn University. It's a strain acutely felt by Black landowners given the Deep South's legacy of enslavement.

Some remaining owners are more determined than ever to stay.

Julia Campbell, 60, has spent two decades establishing a family tree to identify every heir with even the slimmest stake in the 25-acre St. John's Island land her family has held since the 19th century. The former member of a Charleston group established to protect Black cemeteries emphasized that the ground itself bears witness to history.

It's important for her to document — especially at a time when she said "some people want to close the book on us."

"These people who could barely read or write were able to hold onto the property," she said. "We should be able to hold onto it."

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South Carolina's 2017 reforms stymied some predatory behavior, according to Josh Walden of the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation. The Charleston-based non-profit has helped clear titles for over 3,000 tracts worth some \$17.5 million since 2009, but his most modest estimates suggest about 40,000 tracts remain held in heirs' property across six coastal counties alone.

Risk persists for those facing heightened assessments that come with exurban gentrification.

"Obviously, people are still looking for land," Walden said. "They're still approaching heirs' property own-

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ers asking if they'll sell their interests."

The clamor for these lands is so feverish that even people with clear titles remain vulnerable. James calls it "the next frontier in preserving African American property."

South Carolina tax law evaluates residential land at its highest usage — a boon to sellers but a burden for those who want to stay.

"They're not planning to take the money and run," Phillips Community Association President Richard Habersham said of his neighbors. "They're planning to pass it down."

James has proposed that state lawmakers ease growing pains by passing a new "cultural property preservation" tax exemption to provide incentives to support historic communities, just like existing credits help preserve historic buildings.

A statewide measure could resemble local efforts. One ordinance blocked a golf course on Gullah Geechee land on St. Helena Island. Last month, the Beaufort County Council rejected a developer's request to remove a 502-acre plot from a zoning district that bans gated communities and resorts in locations considered culturally significant. Other officials are soliciting feedback from Gullah Geechee and African American communities to identify historical sites in the Charleston area for preservation.

"Property is not just a commodity," James said. "Property has a sentimental value that the law should recognize."

That value became more elusive for Queen Mary Davis when a housing development next door restricted her access to a family cemetery by requiring her to gain admission from security guards.

A formerly enslaved ancestor named Dennis Allen purchased the first patches of what is now the family's 31-acre property back in 1897. It's nestled in a Hilton Head neighborhood that is home to some of the largest Gullah extended families.

But Davis, 70, could soon lose nearly a third of it. The land is stuck in a cumbersome legal dispute with other heirs dating back to 2009. A judge has ordered that 11 acres be placed on the market for \$7 million. A previous deal fell apart after a North Carolina firm rescinded its \$7.5 million offer.

The situation is an egregious example of sagas that attorney Willie Heyward has seen all too often during a 37-year career largely focused on heirs' property. He's represented members on both sides of Davis' contentious case at various points, and says many families get mired in costly, yearslong court battles that ultimately diminish the returns for everyone.

This generation of heirs' property owners will be the last with numbers Heyward considers manageable — about 250 relatives is the most he's seen.

As family trees number thousands of people, any outcome other than land loss can become impractical — a "crushing" prospect for his elderly clients clinging to the last vestiges of their ancestry.

Relatives interested in selling have a legal right to pursue that option, and defending land becomes especially difficult when families aren't united. Heyward and James both want legislators to expand opportunities for mediation so resource-limited families don't rack up legal fees trying to protect their interests.

What was once a vehicle for maintaining ownership has become an engine of its demise.

"I see a very dark future on the horizon if something is not done," Heyward said.

Longtime residents report that Phillips Community sounds different nowadays. Traffic thrums along a busy road. The scuttle of fiddler crabs no longer accompanies walks to a nearby creek. Woods once filled with the calls of raccoon hunts have been replaced by a quiet subdivision.

And still more development looms. A private Charleston-based company has plans for several dozen houses in the center of the neighborhood, spreading closer to the 35 acres bought by the Smalls' great grandfather and largely kept within the bloodline since 1875. The Rev. Elijah Smalls Jr. said he's heard rumblings about new commercial enterprises entering the frenzy.

"If that comes in, that would definitely be the death of the community," he said.

Some of Smalls' neighbors may have left, but the pastor says he's not going anywhere. He built the brick house that sits right off Elijah Smalls Road. He can't start over at his age, and nearby homes cost

too much anyway.

Fred Smalls isn't moving either. Wearing a black baseball cap with "ARMY" emblazoned in gold, he notes that many original members fought for their own freedom in the 128th Regiment of the U.S. Colored Infantry. Paintings of 19th century African American soldiers hang on his walls.

His Army service took him to Germany, Turkey, Alaska and Oklahoma. But he always knew he'd return.

## **Allies of Niger president overthrown by military are appealing to the US and others: Save his life**

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and TRACY BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After nearly three weeks of appealing to the United States and other allies for help restoring Niger's president to power, friends and supporters of the democratically elected leader are making a simpler plea: Save his life.

President Mohamed Bazoum, leader of the last remaining Western-allied democracy across a vast stretch of Africa's Sahara and Sahel, sits confined with his family in an unlit basement of his presidential compound, cut off from resupplies of food and from electricity and cooking gas by the junta that overthrew him, Niger's ambassador to the United States told The Associated Press.

"They are killing him," said the ambassador, Mamadou Kiari Liman-Tinguiri, a close associate who maintains daily calls with the detained leader. The two have been colleagues for three decades, since the now 63-year-old president was a young philosophy instructor, a teacher's union leader, and a democracy advocate noted for his eloquence.

"The plan of the head of the junta is to starve him to death," Liman-Tinguiri told the AP in one of his first interviews since mutinous troops allegedly cut off food deliveries to the president, his wife and his 20-year-old son almost a week ago.

"This is inhuman, and the world should not tolerate that," the ambassador said. "It cannot be tolerated in 2023."

Bazoum sits in the dark basement, the ambassador said. He answers the phone when a call comes in that he knows to be his friend or someone else he wants to speak to. The beleaguered president and his ambassador, whom junta members have declared out of a job, talk one or more times a day.

Bazoum has not been seen out in public since July 26, when military vehicles blocked the gates to the presidential palace and security forces announced they were taking power. It is not possible to independently determine the president's circumstances. The United States, United Nations and others have expressed repeated concern for what they called Bazoum's deteriorating conditions in detention, and warned the junta they would hold it responsible for the well-being of Bazoum and his family.

Separately, Human Rights Watch said Friday it had spoken directly to the detained president and to others in his circle, and received some similar accounts of mistreatment.

However, an activist who supports Niger's new military rulers in its communications said the reports of the president's dire state were false. Insa Garba Saidou said he was in contact with some junta members but did not say how he had knowledge of the president's lot.

"Bazoum was lucky he was not taken anywhere," Saidou said. "He was left in his palace with his phone. Those who did that don't intend to hurt Bazoum."

Niger's military coup and the plight of its ousted leader have drawn global attention — but not because that kind of turmoil is unusual for West Africa. Niger alone has had about a half-dozen military takeovers since independence in 1960. Niger leaders have suffered in coups before, most notably when a military-installed leader was shot down in 1999 by the same presidential guard unit that instigated the current coup.

Niger's return to reflexive armed takeovers by disgruntled troops is reverberating in the U.S. and internationally for two key reasons. One is because Bazoum came to power in a rare democratic presidential election in the Africa's unstable Sahara and Sahel, in the only peaceful, democratic transfer of power that Niger has managed.

The United States alone has invested close to \$1 billion in Niger in recent years to support its democ-

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racy and deliver aid, in addition to building national forces capable of holding off north and west Africa's al-Qaida- and Islamic State-allied armed groups.

The U.S.-backed counterterror presence is the second key reason that Niger's coup is resonating. Americans have a 1,100-strong security presence and have built bases in Niger's capital and far north into its main outposts to counter West Africa's armed jihadist groups. The Biden administration has yet to call what has happened in Niger a coup, citing laws that would obligate the U.S. to cut many of its military partnerships with the country.

Niger's region is dominated by military or military-aligned governments and a growing number of them have entered security partnerships with Russia's Wagner mercenary groups.

The soldiers who ousted Bazoum have announced a ruling structure but said little publicly about their plans. U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland met with Niger's junta members in the capital this week but called them unreceptive to her demands to restore Niger's democracy.

"They were quite firm about how they want to proceed, and it is not in support of the constitution of Niger," Nuland told reporters after.

The junta also told Nuland that Bazoum would die if the regional ECOWAS security bloc intervened militarily to restore democracy, U.S. officials told the AP.

Late this week, the ambassador shrugged that threat off, saying the junta is already on track to kill Bazoum by trapping his family and him with little more than a shrinking supply of dried rice and no means to cook it.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken has spoken several times with the detained president and expressed concern for his and his family's safety. The U.S. says it has cut some aid to the government and paused military cooperation. Blinken has expressed broad support for ECOWAS, whose diplomatic efforts have been spurned by the Niger junta and which has warned of military force as a last resort.

Blinken said in a statement Friday he was "particularly dismayed" that Niger's mutinous soldiers had refused to release Bazoum's family as a goodwill gesture. He gave no details.

While the junta adviser Saidou denied that the junta threatened to kill Bazoum if ECOWAS invaded, he said Bazoum's death would be inevitable if that happened.

"Even if the high officers of the junta won't touch Bazoum, if one gun is shot at one of Niger's borders in order to reinstate Bazoum, I'm sure that there will be soldiers who will put an end to his life," he said.

Bazoum told Human Rights Watch that family members and friends who brought food were being turned away, and that the junta had refused treatment for his young son, who has a heart condition.

Bazoum and his undetained allies want regional partners, the U.S. and others to intervene. With Bazoum vulnerable in captivity, neither he nor the ambassadors specify what they want the U.S. and other allies to do.

Bazoum is a member of Niger's tiny minority of nomadic Arabs, in a country of varying cultures rich in tradition. Despite his political career, Bazoum has retained his people's devotion to livestock, keeping camels that he dotes on, Liman-Tinguiri said.

For all his deprivations, the ambassador said, Bazoum remains in good spirits. "He is a man who is mentally very strong," he said. "He's a man of faith."

## Rising political threats take US into uncharted territory as 2024 election looms

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — This week's confrontation that ended with FBI agents fatally shooting a 74-year-old Utah man who threatened to assassinate President Joe Biden was just the latest example of how violent rhetoric has created a more perilous political environment across the U.S.

Six days earlier, a 52-year-old Texas man was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison for threatening to kill Arizona election workers. Four days before that, prosecutors charged a 56-year-old Michigan



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woman for lying to buy guns for her mentally ill adult son, who threatened to use them against Biden and that state's Democratic governor.

Threats against public officials have been steadily climbing in recent years, creating new challenges for law enforcement, civil rights and the health of American democracy.

The Capitol Police last year reported that they investigated more than double the number of threats against members of Congress as they did four years earlier. Driven by former President Donald Trump's lies that the 2020 election was stolen from him, threats against election workers have exploded, with one in six reporting threats against them and many seasoned election administrators leaving the job or considering it.

"It's definitely increased in the last five years," said Jake Spano, mayor in the Minneapolis suburb of St. Louis Park and a board member of the National League of Cities, which issued a report in 2021 finding that 81% of local elected officials reported receiving threats and 87% saw the problem worsening.

Officials in Spano's town got deluged in 2018, when Trump tweeted critically about its city council's decision to stop saying the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of its meetings.

"The lasting impact of Donald Trump's presidency is that he made it clear that the norms of how we treat each other no longer apply," said Spano, a Democrat.

The threats are not simply an issue of coarsening of the national discourse. Experts warn they can be precursors of political violence.

In 2017, a man who belonged to a Facebook group called "Terminate the Republican Party" opened fire on GOP House members as they practiced for a charity baseball game, severely wounding now-House Majority Leader Steve Scalise. Last year, the 82-year-old husband of then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, was assaulted by a hammer-wielding man who had posted right-wing conspiracy theories online before breaking into the couple's San Francisco home.

Also last year, a man was arrested with knives, a pistol and zip ties outside the home of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh amid protests against the high court overturning women's right to obtain abortions. Then an armed Ohio man in body armor who had been at the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol was shot and killed after trying to enter an FBI office following that agency's search last summer of Trump's Florida resort, Mar-a-Lago.

Trump has repeatedly slammed the FBI and has called for a takeover of the Justice Department should he win the presidency again, as he faces additional charges related to his attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

Trump has referred to the special counsel overseeing the federal prosecutions, Jack Smith, as "deranged" and an "out of touch lunatic," and to the charges against him as "election interference and yet another attempt to rig and steal a presidential election." He also has attacked a local Georgia prosecutor expected to file more charges against him next week, Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis.

Experts warn the escalating rhetoric could increase the risks of violence, especially as the 2024 election and Trump's trials draw closer. Lone attackers acting impulsively, rather than mass violence such as the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, are the greatest worry, said Javed Ali, a former senior FBI counterterrorism official now at the University of Michigan.

"That threat can materialize very quickly with no notice," he said.

In an affidavit from FBI agents, Craig Deleeuw Robertson sounded like he could be that type of threat. Authorities said the self-employed woodworker referred to himself as a "MAGA Trumper" — referring to Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan — and had posted threats against Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland and New York Attorney General Letitia James, all of whom have been targets of Trump's own attacks on social media.

Trump's Truth Social network was the first to warn the FBI about him after Robertson in March posted a threat to kill Bragg, the first prosecutor to file criminal charges against Trump.

Even after a visit from FBI agents, the affidavit said, Robertson continued posting violent words and imagery online, including quipping that if the FBI was still monitoring his posts he would "be sure to have a loaded gun in case you drop by again." He also posted about killing Biden, who was due to visit the

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state Thursday.

Those who knew Robertson said he was not a danger to anyone, only an elderly, largely homebound conservative man spouting off online.

"He believed in his right to bear arms. He believed in his right to say what he feels. When it came down to it, he knew the Lord wouldn't have approved of killing innocent people," said Paul Searing, a local businessman who followed Robertson online for years and warned him when he crossed the line on social media. "Things got out of hand because he just was really frustrated."

Michael German, a former FBI agent who is now a fellow with the Brennan Center for Justice, said social media can transform private venting into menacing-sounding threats.

"Things that may have been screamed at the television before now appear widely in public," German said.

He said the problem is that federal law enforcement has been slow to go after organized right-wing violence, such as violent acts committed by the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys and similar groups before the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol.

While threats against public officials are a routine part of the country's history, German said the rhetoric by Trump and some of his supporters presents a new danger.

"What concerns me is that authority figures — not just Trump, but many others in the Republican Party — have promoted violent groups and dismissed the violence they've committed," he said, adding that it sends a signal to some people who are sympathetic to the groups' views.

Kurt Braddock, a communications professor at American University in Washington, D.C., said rhetoric doesn't have to explicitly direct supporters to commit violence. Even if it inspires just a tiny fraction to commit crimes, it can still be dangerous given the extraordinary reach of political and extremist messaging across the internet and the millions of people who absorb it.

"You get to the point where at least one person can interpret that as a call to violence," Braddock said. "As we've seen, one person can do a lot of damage."

Though the danger is greater and the rhetoric harsher on the political right, Braddock said, the left also has responsibility. Shortly before the arrest outside Kavanaugh's house, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer had warned that the GOP-appointed Supreme Court majority had "released the whirlwind" and "will pay the price" with its ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

Still, experts warned against presuming that too many Americans are so radicalized that they might engage in politically motivated violence.

Joe Mernyk, a doctoral student in Stanford University's Polarization and Social Change Lab, surveyed Democrats and Republicans about their support for political violence and found it to be very low. But perceptions of those in the other party provided a different picture: People in each party believed members of the other had high support for violence.

When participants were told that, in fact, support for violence was low on the other side, their own support for violence dropped even lower, Mernyk said,

Mernyk stressed the importance of "making sure people know these people, like the guy in Utah, are not representative of the Republican Party or the party's attitudes."

Sam Metz in Provo, Utah and Colleen Slevin in Denver contributed to this report.

## As flames swallowed Maui, survivors made harrowing escapes

By MATT SEDENSKY AP National Writer

An immigrant cook building a new life. A widow preparing to say goodbye. A couple taking their wedding vows.

All were caught in the crossfire, forced to flee as flames swallowed parts of Maui, that drop in the Pacific where roads wind past waterfalls, turtles glide through gem-blue waters and a volcano towers overhead.

These are the stories of the survivors:

Mike Cicchino cowered in the back of a van with his wife. Flames and choking black smoke surrounded

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them. People ran and screamed. The sound of explosions thundered.

"We've got to prepare to die," he thought.

He called his mother and told her how much he loved her, then his brother, then the toughest of all, his 4-year-old daughter who was safe with her mother. Every labored breath felt like his last.

"I love you," he told his daughter. "Be good. You know I'm always going to be there for you."

Only about 15 minutes had passed since Cicchino and his wife, Andrezza, had left their home in their truck and driven through a "straight out of a movie" disaster scene. After police roadblocks forced them onto Front Street, they ditched their truck, running one way, then another, finding walls of flames in their path.

They took shelter in the van, thinking it might provide some protection from the smoke. But, seeing the flames fan closer, they sprinted for the sea wall and jumped over to the sharp rocks below.

They dunked their shirts in water, wrapped them around their noses, and crouched low against the wall, trying to escape the smoke. As wood buildings ignited, the embers singed their skin.

With the blaze moving closer and flames licking the top of the wall, they jumped into the ocean.

For the next five or six hours they oscillated between sea and craggy shore. Cicchino, who is 37 and has lived on Maui since he was a child, darted back and forth helping others get over the wall.

At least one of the people he approached was dead.

As the hours passed and he carried more and more people, his rib cage ached and his eyes were nearly swollen shut. At one point, he fell to his knees and vomited.

A Coast Guard boat eventually neared shore and took a couple of children aboard just as firefighters were arriving on land. He and his wife were led by firefighters to a pickup, driving through flames to escape.

They made their way to a triage center, then a shelter. Until the end, he thought he would die.

His phone, saved by a waterproof bag, suddenly got a signal. Now he could spread word he was alive.

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By the time Marlon Vasquez heard the alarms, there was only time to run.

The 31-year-old cook shouted for his brother and opened the door of their Lahaina rental home to thick smoke and intense heat.

"The fire was almost on top of us," he said.

The two sprinted. And, running on for what felt like an eternity, a hellscape unfurled. Day turned to night as smoke blotted out the sun, occasionally bared as a red orb. Roads clogged with cars. People dove into the Pacific. At one point, the flames chased him as strong winds blew them down a mountainside. The air was so black he vomited.

"We ran and ran. We ran almost the whole night and into the next day because the fire didn't stop," Vasquez said.

The brothers kept running down the coast until they came upon a motorist who drove them to a shelter where they joined about 200 others in a gymnasium.

The restaurant Vasquez worked at was destroyed. He only managed to grab his passport, wallet, a few bottles of water and a can of sardines.

He arrived in the U.S. from Guatemala at the start of 2022. Now, his car and everything he worked for has been torched.

He isn't sure if the roommates he and his brother lived with made it out. He wonders about the people they passed who were unable to run as they did. He doesn't know where they will go next. They will look for work in whatever state or country that has jobs for them.

There seemed to be only one certainty for Vasquez.

"We'll keep struggling," he said.

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Tracey Graham was due to spend her last week on Maui snorkeling with sea turtles, dining with friends, and reminiscing about the eight years she called the "beautiful, wonderful piece of paradise" home.

Instead, she fled the fires, is sleeping in a shelter and wondering what became of the places she loved.

"It's scary," says 61-year-old Graham. "It's devastating — that's the only word I keep coming back to."

Graham, who was staying with a friend north of Lahaina, was about to take an afternoon nap Tuesday when she noticed the smell. She went outside, saw flames and smoke, and heard popping noises.

She fled with friends, grabbing her passport, her journal and a framed photo with a button that played a recording of her husband, Cole Wright, telling her how much he loved her.

He died of prostate cancer four months ago.

Authorities kept directing her and her friends to different points. Once she made it to the shelter set up at the Maui War Memorial, rumors of the devastation raged, with many unsure whether their homes and loved ones were safe. She hasn't been able to reach one of her close friends.

"It's disorienting," she says. "You just don't know what's what."

Graham is departing Saturday to start a new life in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. Her plan was already made after her husband's death, but the tragedy of the wildfires cemented the need to leave.

"It's just been too sad," she says.

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It wasn't exactly how Cindy and Bob Curler envisioned their wedding night.

Unable to get back to their Lahaina hotel Tuesday as wildfires swallowed the town, their driver was forced to take them to the garage where he parks his limousine. The newlyweds shared a couch for the night, her in her strapless lace gown, him in his crisp blue suit.

Just hours earlier, the Pittsburgh couple had strolled Lahaina's streets, passing the 150-year-old banyan tree and popping in quaint shops.

There were hiccups as they prepared for their ceremony, but nothing that alarmed them. The power had been knocked out at Lahaina Shores Beach Resort, where they were staying, and they could see flames in the mountains. Winds were "hellacious," 46-year-old Bob said, but flames did not appear close.

The two heard no warnings, so they pressed forward with their elopement plans, driving south to a beach just past Wailea, where they exchanged vows under perfect blue skies. There was still no word of disaster, so they celebrated with a dinner at a nearby resort.

"We didn't know that the town was burning," Bob said.

Their driver tried to get them back to Lahaina, but roads were choked with traffic. Inching along, seeing fire spreading by the highway, they changed course, heading for the garage at 2 a.m.

It wasn't until morning that they saw photos of Lahaina's destruction and realized they were blessed to have escaped. Their hotel appears to have been spared the worst, but they haven't been able to return. They know it's nothing compared to the losses others are suffering.

"Yes it was our wedding day and night but that's only one night for us," Cindy said. "These people are impacted for the rest of their lives"

## **Biden's reelection bid faces vulnerabilities in wake of special counsel appointment**

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — As he gears up for reelection, President Joe Biden is already facing questions about his ability to convince voters that the economy is performing well. There's skepticism about the 80-year-old president's ability to manage a second term. And on Friday, Biden faced a fresh setback when Attorney General Merrick Garland appointed a special counsel to probe his son, Hunter.

Biden's challenges pale in comparison to his predecessor and possible future rival, Donald Trump, who is facing three criminal indictments, with additional charges expected soon. But the appointment of the special counsel was nonetheless a reminder of the vulnerabilities facing Biden as he wages another election campaign in a deeply uncertain political climate.

There was little immediate sign that Garland's decision meaningfully changed Biden's standing within his party. If anything, it underscored the unprecedented nature of the next election. Rather than a battle of ideas waged on the traditional campaign trail, the next push for the presidency may be shaped by sudden legal twists in courtrooms from Washington to Delaware and Miami.



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"Prior to Trump, this would be a big deal," New Hampshire Democratic Party Chair Ray Buckley said of Friday's announcement. "Now, I don't think it means anything. Trump has made everyone so numb to this stuff."

Referring to Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan, Buckley added, "Because of how dismissive MAGA America is to the very real crimes of Trump and his family, it has numbed the minds of swing voters and Democratic voters or activists who would normally be fully engaged and outraged."

Polling has consistently shown that Democratic voters were not excited about Biden's reelection even before Garland's announcement.

Just 47% of Democrats wanted Biden to run again in 2024, according to an AP-NORC poll conducted in April. Democrats' enthusiasm for Biden's presidential campaign has consistently trailed behind Republicans' enthusiasm for Trump's: 55% of Republicans said they wanted Trump to run again in the AP-NORC poll. And Biden's approval ratings, at 40% in the most recent Gallup poll, are lower than virtually every other president in the modern era save Jimmy Carter.

Garland announced Friday that he was naming David Weiss, the Trump-appointed U.S. attorney in Delaware, as the special counsel in the Hunter Biden investigation. It comes as plea deal talks involving tax and gun charges in the case Weiss had already been probing hit an impasse.

The appointment of a special counsel ensures that Trump will not stand alone as the only presidential candidate grappling with the fallout of a serious criminal investigation in the midst of the 2024 campaign season.

Of course, the cases are hardly equal in the context of the next presidential election.

There is no evidence that President Biden himself has committed any wrongdoing. Meanwhile, Trump has been charged in a plot to undermine democracy for his actions leading up to the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol.

He's also facing separate charges for refusing to turn over classified documents after leaving the White House and financial crimes in New York related to a hush money case involving a porn star. And Georgia prosecutors are investigating whether Trump broke state laws by interfering in the 2020 election.

Still, Republicans were hopeful that the new special counsel may ultimately shift attention away from Trump's baggage while bolstering conservative calls to impeach the Democratic president, a proposal that has divided the GOP on Capitol Hill, which has long sought evidence linking Hunter Biden's alleged wrongdoings to his father.

Rep. James Comer of Kentucky, the Republican chair of the House Oversight Committee, has already obtained thousands of pages of financial records from various members of the Biden family through subpoenas to the Treasury Department and various financial institutions as part of a congressional probe. He released a statement Friday accusing Garland of "trying to stonewall congressional oversight."

Comer vowed "to follow the Biden family's money trail."

Trump, the overwhelming front-runner in the crowded Republican presidential nomination fight, used the opportunity to put his likely general election opponent on the defensive, referring to the "Biden crime family" and the "Biden cartel."

"If this special counsel is truly independent — even though he failed to bring proper charges after a four year investigation and he appears to be trying to move the case to a more Democrat-friendly venue — he will quickly conclude that Joe Biden, his troubled son Hunter, and their enablers, including the media, which colluded with the 51 intelligence officials who knowingly misled the public about Hunter's laptop, should face the required consequences," the Trump campaign said in a statement.

Back in New Hampshire, Buckley acknowledged that voters are not excited about Biden's reelection.

"But they're really not excited about Trump," he said. "There's a seriousness around this election. People can say they're not excited (about Biden). They can say, 'Oh, he shouldn't run again.' But the reality is that he's the only alternative to Trump."

Meanwhile, it's unclear how closely key voters are paying attention.

A Marquette Law School Poll conducted last month found that about three-quarters of Americans had

heard about Hunter Biden's agreement to plead guilty to misdemeanor charges of tax evasion and a gun charge. Republicans were slightly more likely than Democrats to say they have heard "a lot" about the topic, with independents being much less likely to be paying attention.

Democratic strategist Bill Burton suggested the GOP's focus on the president's son would backfire.

"From a political standpoint, I think Republicans are stupid to spend so much time talking about the president's son," he said. "People are going to be voting on the economy. They're going to be voting on who's tougher on social media companies and national security."

Burton continued, "As a dad, I think it's pretty disgusting that you would attack someone's son like this."

## **Judge sends FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried to jail, says crypto mogul tampered with witnesses**

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried left a federal courtroom in handcuffs Friday when a judge revoked his bail after concluding that the fallen cryptocurrency wiz had repeatedly tried to influence witnesses against him.

Bankman-Fried drooped his head as Judge Lewis A. Kaplan explained at length why he believed the California man had repeatedly pushed the boundaries of his \$250 million bail package to a point that Kaplan could no longer ensure the protection of the community, including prosecutors' witnesses, unless the 31-year-old was behind bars.

After the hearing ended, Bankman-Fried took off his suit jacket and tie and turned his watch and other personal belongings over to his lawyers. The clanging of handcuffs could be heard as his hands were cuffed in front of him. He was then led out of the courtroom by U.S. marshals.

It was a spectacular fall for a man who prosecutors say portrayed himself as "a savior of the cryptocurrency industry" as he testified before Congress and hired celebrities including Larry David, Tom Brady and Stephen Curry to promote his businesses.

Prosecutors said Bankman-Fried stole billions of dollars in FTX customer deposits to fund his businesses and speculative venture investments, make charitable donations and spend tens of millions of dollars on illegal campaign donations to Democrats and Republicans in an attempt to buy influence over cryptocurrency regulation in Washington.

Kaplan said there was probable cause to believe Bankman-Fried had tried to "tamper with witnesses at least twice" since his December arrest, most recently by showing a journalist the private writings of a former girlfriend and key witness against him and in January when he reached out to FTX's general counsel with an encrypted communication.

The judge said he concluded there was a probability that Bankman-Fried had tried to influence both anticipated trial witnesses "and quite likely others whose names we don't even know" to get them to "back off, to have them hedge their cooperation with the government."

The incarceration order signed by the judge said Kaplan found probable cause to believe Bankman-Fried had committed the federal crime of attempted witness tampering.

Bankman-Fried's lawyers insisted that their client's motives were innocent and he shouldn't be jailed for trying to protect his reputation against a barrage of unfavorable news stories.

Attorney Mark Cohen asked the judge to suspend his incarceration order for an immediate appeal, but Kaplan rejected the request. Within an hour, defense lawyers had filed a notice of appeal.

Bankman-Fried was sent for the night to the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, which has previously housed convicted "pharma bro" pharmaceutical executive Martin Shkreli and convicted sex offenders R. Kelly and Ghislaine Maxwell.

Bankman-Fried had been under house arrest at his parents' home in Palo Alto, California, since his December extradition from the Bahamas on charges that he defrauded investors in his businesses and illegally diverted millions of dollars' worth of cryptocurrency from customers using his FTX exchange.

His bail package severely restricted his internet and phone usage.

The judge noted that the strict rules did not stop him from reaching out in January to a top FTX lawyer, saying he “would really love to reconnect and see if there’s a way for us to have a constructive relationship, use each other as resources when possible, or at least vet things with each other.”

At a February hearing, Kaplan said the communication “suggests to me that maybe he has committed or attempted to commit a federal felony while on release.”

On Friday, Kaplan said he was rejecting defense claims that the communication was benign.

Instead, he said, it seems to be an invitation for the FTX general counsel “to get together with Bankman-Fried” so that their recollections “are on the same page.”

Two weeks ago, prosecutors surprised Bankman-Fried’s attorneys by demanding his incarceration, saying he violated those rules by showing The New York Times the private writings of Caroline Ellison, his former girlfriend and the ex-CEO of Alameda Research, a cryptocurrency trading hedge fund that was one of his businesses.

Prosecutors maintained he was trying to sully her reputation and influence prospective jurors who might be summoned for his October trial by sharing deep thoughts about her job and the romantic relationship she had with Bankman-Fried.

The judge said Friday that the excerpts of Ellison’s communications that Bankman-Fried had shared with a reporter were the kinds of things that somebody who’d been in a relationship with somebody “would be very unlikely to share with anybody, lest The New York Times, except to hurt, discredit, and frighten the subject of the material.”

Ellison pleaded guilty in December to criminal charges carrying a potential penalty of 110 years in prison. She has agreed to testify against Bankman-Fried as part of a deal that could lead to a more lenient sentence.

Bankman-Fried’s lawyers argued he probably failed in a quest to defend his reputation because the article cast Ellison in a sympathetic light. They also said prosecutors exaggerated the role Bankman-Fried had in the article.

They said prosecutors were trying to get their client locked up by offering evidence consisting of “innuendo, speculation, and scant facts.”

Since prosecutors made their detention request, Kaplan had imposed a gag order barring public comments by people participating in the trial, including Bankman-Fried.

David McCraw, a lawyer for the Times, had written to the judge, noting the First Amendment implications of any blanket gag order, as well as public interest in Ellison and her cryptocurrency trading firm.

Ellison confessed to a central role in a scheme defrauding investors of billions of dollars that went undetected, McCraw said.

“It is not surprising that the public wants to know more about who she is and what she did and that news organizations would seek to provide to the public timely, pertinent, and fairly reported information about her, as The Times did in its story,” McCraw said.

## Tensions rise as West African nations prepare to send troops to restore democracy in Niger

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

NIAMEY, Niger (AP) — Tensions are escalating between Niger’s new military regime and the West African regional bloc that has ordered the deployment of troops to restore Niger’s flailing democracy.

The ECOWAS bloc said on Thursday it had decided to deploy a “standby force” aimed at restoring constitutional order in Niger after its Sunday deadline to reinstate ousted President Mohamed Bazoum expired.

Hours earlier, two Western officials told The Associated Press that Niger’s junta had told a top U.S. diplomat they would kill Bazoum if neighboring countries attempted any military intervention to restore his rule.

It’s unclear when or where the ECOWAS force would deploy, and how reports of the threats against Bazoum would affect a decision by the 15-member bloc to intervene. Conflict experts say it the force would likely comprise some 5,000 troops led by Nigeria and could be ready within weeks.

After the ECOWAS meeting, neighboring Ivory Coast’s president, Alassane Ouattara, said his country

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would take part in the military operation, along with Nigeria and Benin.

"Ivory Coast will provide a battalion and has made all the financial arrangements ... We are determined to install Bazoum in his position. Our objective is peace and stability in the sub-region," Ouattara said on state television.

Niger, an impoverished country of some 25 million people, was seen as one of the last hopes for Western nations to partner with in beating back a jihadi insurgency linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group that's ravaged the region. France and the United States have more than 2,500 military personnel in Niger and together with other European partners had poured hundreds of millions of dollars into propping up its military.

The junta responsible for spearheading the coup, led by Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani, has claimed it could do a better job than Bazoum's government of protecting the nation from jihadi violence, and has exploited anti-French sentiment among the population to shore up its support.

Nigeriens in the capital, Niamey, on Friday said ECOWAS isn't in touch with the reality on the ground and shouldn't intervene.

"It is our business, not theirs. They don't even know the reason why the coup happened in Niger," said Achirou Harouna Albassi, a resident. Bazoum was not abiding by the will of the people, he said.

Hundreds of people marched toward the French military base in Niamey on Friday waving Russian flags and screaming "Down with France." Many were young, including children, all chanting that the French should go.

Also Friday, the African Union expressed strong support for ECOWAS' decision and called on the junta to "urgently halt the escalation with the regional organization." It also called for the immediate release of Bazoum. An African Union meeting to discuss the situation in Niger is expected to take place on Monday.

On Thursday night after the summit, France's foreign ministry said it supported "all conclusions adopted." U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said his country appreciated "the determination of ECOWAS to explore all options for the peaceful resolution of the crisis" and would hold the junta accountable for the safety and security of President Bazoum. However, he did not specify whether the U.S. supported the deployment of troops.

The mutinous soldiers that ousted Bazoum more than two weeks ago have entrenched themselves in power, appear closed to dialogue and have refused to release the president. Representatives of the junta told U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland of the threat to Bazoum's life during her visit to the country this week, a Western military official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the situation. A U.S. official confirmed that account, also speaking on condition of anonymity, because the official was not authorized to speak to the media.

"The threat to kill Bazoum is grim," said Alexander Thurston, assistant professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati. There have been unwritten rules until now about how overthrown presidents will be treated and violence against Bazoum would evoke some of the worst coups of the past, he said.

Human Rights Watch said Friday that it had spoken to Bazoum, who said that his 20-year-old son was sick with a serious heart condition and has been refused access to a doctor. The president said he hasn't had electricity for nearly 10 days and isn't allowed to see family, friends or bring supplies into the house.

It's unclear if the threat on Bazoum's life would change ECOWAS' decision to intervene militarily. It might give them pause, or push the parties closer to dialogue, but the situation has entered uncharted territory, analysts say.

"An ECOWAS invasion to restore constitutional order into a country of Niger's size and population would be unprecedented," said Nate Allen, an associate professor at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Niger has a fairly large and well-trained army that, if it actively resisted an invasion, could pose significant problems for ECOWAS. This would be a very large and significant undertaking, he said.

While the region oscillates between mediation and preparing for war, Nigeriens are suffering the impact of harsh economic and travel sanctions imposed by ECOWAS.

Before the coup, more than 4 million Nigeriens were reliant on humanitarian assistance and the situation could become more dire, said Louise Aubin, the U.N. resident coordinator in Niger.



"The situation is alarming. ... We'll see an exponential rise and more people needing more humanitarian assistance," she said, adding that the closure of land and air borders makes it hard to bring aid into the country and it's unclear how long the current stock will last.

Aid groups are battling restrictions on multiple fronts.

ECOWAS sanctions have banned the movement of goods between Niger and member countries, making it hard to bring in materials. The World Food Program has some 30 trucks stuck at the Benin border unable to cross. Humanitarians are also trying to navigate restrictions within the country as the junta has closed the airspace, making it hard to get clearance to fly the humanitarian planes that transport goods and personnel to hard-hit areas.

Flights are cleared on a case-by-case basis and there's irregular access to fuel, which disrupts aid operations, Aubin said.

The U.N. has asked ECOWAS to make exceptions to the sanctions and is speaking to Niger's foreign ministry about doing the same within the country.

## **Brazil's police allege Bolsonaro got money from \$70,000 sale of luxury jewelry gifts**

By CARLA BRIDI and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

BRASILIA, Brazil (AP) — Brazil's federal police on Friday alleged former President Jair Bolsonaro received cash from the nearly \$70,000 sale of two luxury watches he received as gifts from Saudi Arabia while in office, posing another potential blow for the embattled far-right leader.

Earlier in the day, officers raided the homes and offices of several people purportedly involved in the case, including a four-star army general. Bolsonaro has denied any wrongdoing involving the gifts.

A Federal Police officer said the force is seeking authorization to access the personal banking and financial information of Bolsonaro. The officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the investigation, said the Federal Police had asked for help from the FBI.

Bolsonaro's lawyers said in a statement that he would authorize Brazil's judiciary to have access to his banking records.

"President Bolsonaro has never embezzled or misplaced any public assets," it said.

The case adds to the legal jeopardy facing Bolsonaro for activities while he was president. He is also being investigated in relation to a rampage by his supporters in the national capital after he left office as well as acts during the presidential election campaign he lost last fall.

Brazil requires its citizens arriving by plane from abroad to declare goods worth more than \$1,000 and, for any amount above that exemption, pay a tax equal to 50% of their value. The jewelry would have been exempt from tax had it been a gift from Saudi Arabia to Brazil, but would not have been Bolsonaro's to keep.

"The amounts obtained from these sales were transformed into cash and then became personal assets of the former president through middle people and without entering the formal banking system," Federal Police contend, according to an order issued by Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes.

The judge said police believe the strategy of the suspects was "hiding the origin, location and ownership of these amounts."

According to the investigation, Bolsonaro's aide, Lt. Col. Mauro Cid, in June 2022 sold to a store in the U.S. a Rolex watch and a Patek Philippe watch given as a gift by the government of Saudi Arabia in 2019 for a total of \$68,000, the judge's order said. The money was allegedly transferred to the bank account of Cid's father the same day.

In March 2023, when investigations were already underway and the Federal Police requested Bolsonaro return two sets of jewelry gifts, his lawyer, Frederick Wassef, repurchased the Rolex watch in Miami and turned it over to Brazilian authorities in April, the order said.

Both Wassef and Cid's father were targets of the search and seizure warrants issued Friday, along with a close adviser to Bolsonaro responsible for returning the sets of jewelry.

Earlier this year, Bolsonaro was ruled ineligible to run for office until 2030 after a panel of judges ruled he abused his power and cast unfounded doubts on the country's electronic voting system. He also is facing trial in several other cases that could put him behind bars.

One of the investigations revolves around Cid's arrest in May for allegedly falsifying COVID-19 vaccine cards for his own family and Bolsonaro's family during the pandemic.

## **Kentucky school district rushes to fix bus route snarl that canceled classes and outraged parents**

By BRUCE SCHREINER, DYLAN LOVAN and TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — An overly-ambitious redesign of bus routes for Louisville's school district turned into a logistical meltdown on the first day of classes, forcing schools to close as administrators said Friday that students might stay home for part of next week until the mess is untangled.

Parents were fuming and some state politicians pressed for changes in the sprawling urban district after some of the 96,000 students didn't get picked up on Wednesday for school in the morning or came home hours late — with some arriving after dark.

"They had all summer to get this figured out and they couldn't figure it out," said Berkley Collins, a mother of two students in Jefferson County Public Schools.

Another appalled parent, Beau Kilpatrick, said one of his young daughters was covered in urine when she finally arrived home at 9:15 p.m. He called it a "complete failure" by the district.

"They were hungry," he said of his two elementary-age kids. "They were thirsty. They couldn't use the bathroom. They were scared because they just wanted to get home."

On a day that started with so much excitement for the start of a new school year, his children arrived home heartbroken, Kilpatrick said. He was heartbroken, too.

After just one disastrous day, Kentucky's largest district is reexamining the bus routing system designed by AlphaRoute, a Massachusetts-based consulting company that uses computer algorithms to map out courses and stops.

It could take until the middle of next week to resolve the problems enough to resume classes, Superintendent Marty Pollio said Friday, promising to give parents plenty of notice before Monday.

"I said it from the very beginning, I take responsibility for it myself," Pollio said at a news conference, repeating his earlier apology to families, bus drivers and school staff.

He said the district should have anticipated that the new plan didn't leave enough time for busses to get from stop to stop, especially on the first day of school when delays are bound to happen.

The overhaul was intended to solve a basic math problem for the district: Last school year, it didn't have enough drivers to cover all the routes. As a result, thousands of kids missed considerable amounts of instructional time as some drivers made double and triple runs.

The redesigned plan shrunk the number of bus routes in response to that driver shortage.

Pollio said the district will have to stick with the new plan, which he admitted "isn't perfect."

"But it's going to be much more efficient, and our communication will be much better with families and schools," he said. "We want to make sure we get that right before we put the kids back on a school bus again."

The district has 65,000 bus riders, according to its website.

In assessing fault for the opening day fiasco, the superintendent said he's "not going to put it on the company," referring to AlphaRoute, adding that it was more a problem with implementation.

Pollio also emphasized that he wasn't blaming bus drivers, and district officials have acknowledged the system faced a "big learning curve" in carrying out the new plan. Leading up to the start of the school year, bus drivers had several days to practice their routes, and they continued making practice runs Thursday and Friday.

AlphaRoute said in a statement that the "full range of root causes" for the problems weren't yet clear.

"We recognize that the situation was extremely regrettable and likely caused by the significant changes

to bus routing," the company said. "Combined with their new school assignment model, this is a substantial amount of change."

Tiesha Calbert experienced the problems both as a parent and as the director of a child care center.

She says the district moved a school bus stop that was right in front of the center. Now there are multiple stops between 1 block and 2 1/2 blocks away. A special needs child waited over 3 hours for a bus that never came, she said.

Calbert said she's required by the state to sign the kids out, but she doesn't have enough people to follow them to their bus stops and wait with them.

"I have to figure out what we're going to do," she said. "I'm not going to let these kids go back out and just be wandering around for hours."

A group of state lawmakers representing Jefferson County districts called Wednesday's chaos "the last straw," saying the debacle "must be the catalyst for change" in the school system.

The lawmakers signaled they will push for legislation ensuring that students have the right to attend their neighborhood schools. They called for a commission to evaluate splitting up the school system, contending that the district currently is "too big to properly manage." They also called for changes to the local school board.

Many other districts across the country are experiencing similar bus driver shortages.

A survey of school system leaders taken between October and December 2022 found staffing shortages were not as severe compared to the fall of 2021, but many reported trouble finding enough substitute teachers, special education teachers and bus drivers. In the American School District Panel Survey, 45% of district leaders reported a "considerable shortage" of bus drivers.

Columbus City Schools in Ohio experienced its own upheaval in 2022 that led to mid-school year changes in its transportation plan, which it blamed on its own driver shortage as well as issues with a new software system. The district had a contract with AlphaRoute for software, the Columbus Dispatch reported.

## **Attorney general appoints a special counsel in Hunter Biden probe, deepening investigation**

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Merrick Garland appointed a special counsel Friday in the Hunter Biden probe, a surprise move that intensifies the investigation into the president's son ahead of the 2024 election.

Garland noted the "extraordinary circumstances" of the matter as he named David Weiss, the U.S. attorney in Delaware who had already been probing Hunter Biden's financial dealings, as special counsel after plea deal talks in the case broke down.

The sudden turn of events raises fresh questions about the case against Hunter Biden on tax evasion and a gun charge, deepening an investigation that was close to resolution just weeks ago. Weiss had asked to be named special counsel, gaining broad authority to investigate and report out his findings.

It comes as the Justice Department has taken the unprecedented step of indicting former President Donald Trump, who's President Joe Biden's chief rival in next year's election, in two separate cases. It also puts questions about Biden's family at the forefront of the 2024 presidential election.

Speaking at the Justice Department, Garland said he expects the special counsel to work expeditiously in an "even-handed and urgent" manner.

Garland said Weiss, who had been appointed by Trump as U.S. attorney, told him this week the investigation had reached a stage in which he should continue as special counsel.

"Upon considering his request, as well as the extraordinary circumstances relating to this matter, I have concluded it is in the public interest to appoint him as special counsel," Garland said.

The announcement of a special counsel is a significant development from the typically cautious Garland and provides Weiss with independence, authority and budget to pursue the investigation.

It's not fully clear why the attorney general took the step in appointing a special counsel for the Hunter Biden case, but prosecutors in Delaware also announced Friday that plea deal talks Weiss was pursuing

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in the tax evasion case had hit an impasse.

In a court filing Friday, Weiss' team said charges would be better filed in California or Washington. Though Garland has said Weiss always had the authority to file outside Delaware, the venue may have been a factor in his request to be named special counsel.

Nevertheless, the announcement ensures the Justice Department's probes of Trump, and now of Biden's youngest son, who used drugs and whose personal entanglements have trailed his father's political career, will carry into election season.

The federal cases differ significantly: Trump has been indicted and is awaiting trial in two separate cases brought by special prosecutor Jack Smith. One is over Trump's refusal to turn over classified documents stored at his Mar-a-Lago estate. The other involves charges of fraud and conspiracy to overturn the 2020 election in the run up to the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol.

In the case of Hunter Biden, the president has not been accused or charged with any wrongdoing by prosecutors probing the affairs of his son.

Hunter Biden's attorney Chris Clark said little has changed about their understanding of the situation and the prosecutor's role.

"Whether in Delaware, Washington, D.C., or anywhere else, we expect a fair resolution not infected by politics," Clark said in a statement.

President Biden has said repeatedly he does not talk with his son about business.

Trump's team on Friday questioned the independence of the special counsel Weiss, who he himself had appointed. But a Trump spokesman said the prosecutor should move quickly, and anyone found with wrongdoing "should face the required consequences."

Mike Pence, another Republican rival for the presidency in 2024, told reporters at the Iowa State Fair that he welcomed the special counsel appointment — as he made his own dig at the Biden family.

"To be honest with you, I can't relate to what his son was doing when he was vice president," said Pence, who served alongside Trump. "When I was vice president, my son was flying an F35 in the Marine Corps defending this country."

Garland said Weiss will have "all the resources he requests" to probe the matter.

Last month, Hunter Biden's plea deal over tax evasion and a gun charge collapsed after U.S. District Court Judge Maryellen Noreika, who was appointed by Trump, raised multiple concerns about the specifics.

House Republicans had derided that agreement as a "sweetheart" deal as they pushed their own probe into Hunter Biden's business dealings.

House Republicans have been struggling to connect the son's work to his father, and so far they have not been able to produce evidence to show any wrongdoing.

Rep. James Comer, the Republican chair of the House Oversight Committee, has been leading the congressional inquiry into Hunter Biden's financial ties and transactions.

Comer joined forces with two chairmen of powerful House committees to launch a larger investigation into claims by two IRS agents who said the Justice Department improperly interfered in the yearslong case.

The Republicans claimed Weiss was being blocked from becoming a special counsel. It's a claim Weiss and the Justice Department denied.

The Kentucky lawmaker has obtained thousands of pages of financial records from various members of the Biden family through subpoenas.

Since then, Comer has brought in a former business associate of Hunter Biden, Devon Archer, who provided fresh insight during closed-door testimony into how the Democratic president's son capitalized on his relationship with his father, who was then vice president, to court foreign investors.

Archer said Hunter Biden was using the "illusion of access" in Washington. But he offered no tangible evidence that Joe Biden played any role in his son's work beyond saying hello during their daily family calls or as he stopped by a couple of dinners.

Comer joined other Republicans Friday in rejecting the appointment of a special counsel, calling it a "coverup" by the Justice Department, and vowed to continue his own probe.



Special counsels are typically appointed to investigate cases where the Justice Department perceives itself as having a conflict or where it's deemed to be in the public interest.

As special counsels, they aren't subject to day-to-day supervision from the Justice Department, though they are still overseen by the attorney general. They have a budget and, unlike most prosecutors, are expected to produce a report at the end of their investigations explaining their findings and decisions.

Weiss was nominated by Trump to serve as Delaware U.S. attorney in 2017 and was retained after Biden took over so he could continue to oversee the Hunter Biden investigation.

## California judge who's charged with murder texted court staff that he shot his wife, prosecutors say

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

SANTA ANA, Calif. (AP) — A Southern California judge accused of killing his wife during an argument while drunk texted his court clerk and bailiff afterward to say he had shot her, prosecutors said Friday as they charged him with murder.

A court filing from prosecutors says Orange County Superior Court Judge Jeffrey Ferguson texted minutes after last week's killing: "I just lost it. I just shot my wife. I won't be in tomorrow. I will be in custody. I'm so sorry."

Ferguson is free on \$1 million bail. But prosecutors said they're seeking new bail conditions to protect public safety and ensure he doesn't flee after authorities found 47 weapons, including the pistol used in the shooting, and more than 26,000 rounds of ammunition at his Anaheim home. The weapons are legally owned but a rifle registered in his name is still missing, they said.

The shooting happened after Ferguson and his wife, Sheryl Ferguson, were arguing at a restaurant on Aug. 3, the Orange County district attorney's office said in the court filing. The argument continued after the couple returned to their home in the upscale neighborhood of Anaheim Hills. The court document says the wife said something to the effect of "why don't you point a real gun at me?" and he pulled a pistol from his ankle holster and shot her in the chest.

Their adult son called 911 and said his father had been drinking too much and shot his mom, the document says.

Jeffrey Ferguson also called 911 to vaguely report the shooting. When asked if he shot his wife, he said he didn't want to talk about it at that time and she needed paramedics.

When officers arrived, Ferguson smelled of alcohol and told them, "Oh man I can't believe I did this," according to the document.

Ferguson, 72, was arrested at his home. He was released a day later and is set to be arraigned on Sept. 1.

On Friday, prosecutors charged Ferguson with murder with weapons-related enhancements. They want him to surrender his passport, wear an ankle monitor and possess no alcohol or firearms.

Ferguson's attorneys, Paul Meyer and John Barnett, issued a brief statement and declined to answer questions. "This is a tragedy for the entire Ferguson family. It was an accident and nothing more," they said.

Ferguson has been a judge since 2015. He handles criminal cases in the Orange County city of Fullerton. He started his legal career in the Orange County district attorney's office in 1983 and went on to work narcotics cases, for which he won various awards. He served as president of the North Orange County Bar Association from 2012 to 2014.

In 2017, Ferguson was admonished by the Commission on Judicial Performance for posting a statement on Facebook about a judicial candidate "with knowing or reckless disregard for the truth of the statement" and for being Facebook friends with attorneys appearing before him in court, according to a copy of the agency's findings.

Ferguson said on his Facebook page that he grew up in a military family and traveled throughout Asia as a child. He went on to attend college and law school in California. He and his wife were married in 1996.

The arrest shocked the Southern California legal community and officials have been grappling with how

the case should be handled. The Orange County district attorney's office asked state officials to weigh in on whether there was a conflict of interest before filing charges. A judge in neighboring Los Angeles County will hear the case, officials said.

The Orange County Sheriff's Department, which runs the county jail, said Ferguson was released last week according to the pre-established rules for bail and the law. No additional conditions were sought for his release by Anaheim's police agency, which arrested him, said Jeff Puckett, Orange County's assistant sheriff for custody operations.

"We're simply the people that housed him as part of our county mandate to house arrestees," he said. "The sheriff's department cannot impose conditions."

At the time of Ferguson's arrest, the facts and circumstances didn't justify a bail enhancement, said Anaheim police Sgt. Jon McClintock. He said the judge "is afforded the same constitutional right to post bail as anyone else" and declined to comment on the filing by the district attorney's office.

Orange County is made up of a cluster of cities — the most populous being Anaheim — that are between Los Angeles and San Diego and are collectively home to more than 3 million people.

## Judge warns of restraints to what evidence Trump can talk about, agrees to limited protective order

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST, NOMAAN MERCHANT and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal judge overseeing the election conspiracy case against Donald Trump warned Friday that there are limits on what the former president can publicly say about evidence in the investigation as he campaigns for a second term in the White House.

Presiding over her first hearing for the case, U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan in Washington heard arguments on how to structure a protective order for evidence turned over by prosecutors, a common step in criminal cases. But she also used the forum to address the case's unprecedented mix of legal and political concerns.

Chutkan stressed that political considerations wouldn't guide her decisions. She also repeatedly said Trump was subject to the court's rules as a defendant before trial even as he runs for the 2024 Republican nomination for president.

"Your client's defense is supposed to happen in this courtroom, not on the internet," Chutkan told Trump's lawyers.

The judge said that the more anyone makes "inflammatory" statements about the case, the greater her urgency will be to move the case more quickly to trial to prevent witness intimidation or jury pool contamination. She noted that "arguably ambiguous statements" could be construed as intimidation or harassment of potential witnesses.

"I will take whatever measures are necessary to safeguard the integrity of the case," she said.

A prosecutor said the Justice Department was prepared to turn over an initial batch of more than 11 million pages of evidence to Trump's lawyers in the first criminal case seeking to hold Trump accountable for his efforts to cling to power before an angry mob of supporters fueled by his election lies attacked the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

Chutkan agreed with Trump's defense team on a looser version of a protective order barring the public release only of materials deemed sensitive, like grand jury materials. But prosecutors consider most of the evidence in the case to be sensitive, and she largely sided with the government on what will get that label and protections.

Thomas Windom, a top deputy to special counsel Jack Smith, also argued Trump needs safeguards when he reviews case materials. In another sign of the unique circumstances facing the former president, Windom quipped about the indictment Trump faces in Florida after classified materials were discovered in his Mar-a-Lago residence.

"He has shown a tendency to hold on to material to which he should not," Windom said.

The protective order became an early flashpoint in the case as prosecutors last week called the judge's

attention to a post on Trump's social media platform, Truth Social, including a screen shot where he said he would be "coming after" those who "go after" him.

They warned Trump, who has railed against prosecutors and the judge online and during campaign events, could improperly share sensitive evidence that could have a "harmful chilling effect on witnesses."

Prosecutors had wanted a broad order that sought to prevent the public release of all evidence they hand over to Trump's defense as they prepare for trial, instead limiting evidence to a small circle of lawyers and possible witnesses.

"The defendant has broadcast their strategy, and that is to not try this case in the courtroom," Windom said.

But the defense argued the government's proposed order went too far and would restrict his free speech rights, especially as he runs for president. They argued that the need to protect sensitive information "does not require a blanket gag order over all documents produced by the government."

John Lauro, an attorney for Trump, raised the example of former Vice President Mike Pence — who is both competing against Trump for the Republican nomination and a potential witness in the case before Chutkan. Trump has repeatedly attacked Pence for being disloyal.

"President Trump has the ability to respond fairly to political opponents," Lauro said.

Trump, the early front-runner in the GOP presidential primary, says he is innocent of the charges, including conspiracy to defraud the United States. He has portrayed investigations of him as politically motivated.

Prosecutors say a substantial amount of evidence they're ready to turn over to Trump's legal team includes sensitive and confidential information — like transcripts from the grand jury that investigated the case and evidence obtained through sealed search warrants. Grand jury proceedings are secret.

"If the defendant were to begin issuing public posts using details — or, for example, grand jury transcripts — obtained in discovery here, it could have a harmful chilling effect on witnesses or adversely affect the fair administration of justice in this case," prosecutors wrote in their motion.

Sensitive material that will be covered by the protective order include documents related to witness interviews and material obtained from other governmental entities.

The case unsealed last week comes as Trump faces two other criminal cases and tries to reclaim the White House.

Trump has pleaded not guilty to four felony counts, including conspiracy to defraud the U.S. and conspiracy to obstruct Congress' certification of Democrat Joe Biden's electoral victory. The charges could lead to a lengthy prison sentence in the event of a conviction, with the most serious counts calling for up to 20 years.

Smith's team has indicated that it wants the case to move to trial swiftly, and this week it proposed a Jan. 2 trial date. Trump is already scheduled to stand trial in March in a New York case stemming from hush money payments made during the 2016 campaign and in May in another case brought by Smith accusing the former president of hoarding classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida.

Magistrate Judge Bruce Reinhart in June imposed a similar protective order in the Florida case that prohibits Trump and his legal team from publicly disclosing evidence turned over to them by prosecutors without prior approval.

## **The origins of special counsels, their powers and what to expect in the Hunter Biden probe**

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

The appointment of a special counsel to oversee the Justice Department's probe of Hunter Biden is bringing renewed attention on the role such prosecutors have played in modern American history.

On Friday, Attorney General Merrick Garland tapped David Weiss, the U.S. attorney in Delaware who has been probing the financial and business dealings of the president's son, to oversee the department's investigation. He said Weiss asked to be appointed to the position and told him that "in his judgment, his

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investigation has reached a stage at which he should continue his work," now as special counsel.

In January, Garland appointed Robert Hur, a former U.S. attorney in Maryland, to oversee the department's investigation into how several batches of documents marked as classified ended up at Joe Biden's Delaware home and at the offices of the president's Washington think tank.

And last year, Garland appointed former Justice Department public corruption prosecutor Jack Smith to lead investigations into the retention of classified documents at former President Donald Trump's Florida estate, Mar-a-Lago, as well as key aspects of a separate probe involving the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection and efforts to undo the 2020 election. Trump is now facing charges in both cases.

A look at the origins of the special counsel, the position's powers and what to expect as Weiss pursues his work:

## WHAT EXACTLY IS A SPECIAL COUNSEL?

A special counsel is an attorney appointed to investigate, and possibly prosecute, a case in which the Justice Department perceives itself as having a conflict or where it's deemed to be in the public interest to have someone outside the government come in and take responsibility for a matter.

According to the Code of Federal Regulations, a special counsel must have "a reputation for integrity and impartial decisionmaking," as well as "an informed understanding of the criminal law and Department of Justice policies."

Though they're not subject to the day-to-day supervision of the Justice Department, special counsels must still comply with department regulations, policies and procedures. They also technically report to the attorney general — the one government official who can fire them.

The attorney general is entitled to seek explanations from a special counsel about any requested investigative or prosecutorial step, but under the regulations is also expected to give great weight to the special counsel's views. In the event the attorney general rejects a move the special counsel wants to make, the Justice Department is to notify Congress at the end of the investigation.

## WHAT POWERS DO THEY HAVE?

Special counsels are provided with a budget and can request a staff of attorneys, both inside and outside the department, if they need extra help.

In addition to the ability to bring indictments, special counsels are vested with bread-and-butter law enforcement tools such as the power to issue subpoenas and search warrants. Robert Mueller, a former FBI director who as special counsel in the Trump administration led the investigation into possible coordination between Russia and the 2016 Trump campaign, issued more than 2,800 subpoenas and executed nearly 500 search-and-seizure warrants.

## HOW DO INDEPENDENT COUNSELS DIFFER FROM SPECIAL COUNSELS?

The position of special counsel differs in key ways from the work of independent counsels, who used to operate outside the supervision of the Justice Department and who led significant investigations in the post-Watergate era into administrations of both political parties.

One such independent counsel was Lawrence E. Walsh. During the Iran-contra affair in President Ronald Reagan's second term, Walsh was appointed to probe secret arms sales to Iran and the diversion of money to rebel forces fighting the Nicaraguan government.

A decade later, independent counsel Ken Starr investigated fraudulent real estate deals involving a long-time associate of President Bill Clinton and first lady Hillary Clinton, delved into the removal of documents from the office of deputy White House counsel Vincent Foster after his suicide and assembled evidence of Clinton's sexual encounters with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky. As a result, Clinton was impeached by the House but survived a Senate trial.

But because of concerns over the cost and sprawling nature of such probes, Congress in 1999 permitted the provision governing independent counsels to expire.

The Justice Department then created new special counsel regulations, designing a position with intentionally less autonomy for circumstances in which the department feels it has a conflict of interest or wants to avoid becoming excessively entangled in politically sticky matters — like the current Trump-related probes.



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Mueller was appointed in 2017 to investigate Russian election interference, a two-year probe that yielded criminal charges against 34 people, including several Trump associates, and three business entities. Mueller did not allege a criminal conspiracy between the Trump campaign and Russia. Though Mueller reached no conclusion on whether Trump obstructed justice, he also did not exonerate him.

Weeks before Attorney General William Barr left office, he gave John Durham, then the top federal prosecutor in Connecticut, the title of special counsel to ensure that he could continue investigating the origins of the Russia probe under new Democratic Justice Department leadership. In May, Durham released his findings in the form of a 300-page report showing that the FBI rushed into its investigation of ties between Russia and Trump's 2016 campaign and relied too much on raw and unconfirmed intelligence.

## WHO IS SPECIAL COUNSEL DAVID WEISS?

Appointed by Trump, Weiss was sworn in as Delaware's U.S. attorney in 2018, according to his official biography. He was retained after Biden took over the presidency so he could continue to oversee the Hunter Biden investigation.

Prior to that, Weiss clerked for a justice on the Delaware Supreme Court. He was a federal prosecutor before going into private practice, where he focused on commercial litigation. After a stint with a financial services firm, he rejoined the Justice Department in 2007.

In his current position, Weiss has been leading the federal government's investigation into Hunter Biden's financial and business dealings. As special counsel, he will have broader authority to conduct a more sweeping investigation across various areas.

In June, Hunter Biden was charged with two misdemeanor crimes of failure to pay more than \$100,000 in taxes from over \$1.5 million in income in 2017 and 2018. He had been expected to plead guilty after making an agreement with prosecutors, who were planning to recommend two years of probation.

At the time, prosecutors said Hunter Biden remained under investigation. The deal unraveled in July as a federal judge raised concerns about the terms of the agreement.

Just as his appointment as special counsel was announced on Friday, Weiss notified a federal judge in Delaware that plea deal talks in the Hunter Biden case were at an "impasse."

House Republicans are also mounting their own investigation into Hunter Biden's business dealings. They have been seeking to connect the son's work to his father and so far have not been able to produce evidence to show any wrongdoing.

## CLIMATE GLIMPSE: Here's what you need to see and know today

By The Associated Press undefined

In Hawaii, firefighters were still working Friday to fully contain devastating wildfires that have killed at least 55 people. As the fires diminish, thousands of residents of the historic coastal town of Lahaina are finding they lost everything — as this photograph by Associated Press photographer Rick Bowmer helps illustrate.

They're wondering how they, and their town, will rebuild from fires that are also taking a toll on the environment.

Here's what else is happening related to extreme weather and the climate right now:

— China said severe floods in the northern province of Hebei this month brought on by remnants of Typhoon Doksuri killed at least 29 people and caused billions of dollars in economic losses.

— Jakarta, which routinely tops the list of the world's most polluted cities, did it again on Friday in a ranking by a Swiss air quality technology company. Inefficient and polluting vehicles that can be stalled in traffic for hours at a time are a major culprit.

—The U.S. Energy Department said Friday it's giving \$1.2 billion to a pair of projects that would directly remove planet-warming carbon dioxide from the air. Direct air capture doesn't yet exist on a meaningful scale, and some skeptics say money would be better spent on more practical efforts.

—The Biden administration said it may soon launch a formal evaluation of risks posed by vinyl chloride, the cancer-causing chemical that burned following the fiery train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio.

—California took a step toward delaying closure of three gas-fired power plants through 2026. Officials say the plants are needed to guarantee power during major weather events such as heat waves. Activists say the state needs to move more quickly to add renewable power.

—The man who will lead the U.N.'s global climate summit later this year, United Arab Emirates minister Sultan al-Jaber, told Caribbean nations that some of the harshest effects of climate change had fallen on their region, and more money should be found to tackle the problem.

—The National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration said record-hot oceans and a rising El Niño are doubling the chances of a bad Atlantic hurricane season this summer and fall.

—Officials reported that flooding from heavy monsoon rains in Myanmar have killed five people and displaced about 60,000 since mid-July.

#### QUOTABLE:

"I've got nothing left. I'm a disabled vet, so now I'm a homeless vet." — Thomas Leonard, a retired mailman and Vietnam veteran, after the flames that burned Lahaina, Hawaii, destroyed his apartment and melted his Jeep. Leonard spent hours sheltering from the fire behind a seawall.

## Joint practices provide more competition for NFL starters than preseason games

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

Some of the best competition in the NFL this summer takes place on practice fields.

More teams are holding joint practices and holding their star players out of preseason games. It's been a growing trend since the preseason schedule was shortened to three games.

A total of 27 teams are scheduled to participate in joint sessions this year, up from 23 last season. Thirteen teams are holding joint practices with two clubs, up from seven last year.

The joint sessions allow coaches to see their starters in a more controlled atmosphere with less fear of injury. Meanwhile, rookies, backups and players battling for starting jobs or roster spots get most of the game action.

"I think the joint practices are really going to be a good evaluation tool," Houston Texans general manager Nick Caserio said. "What a lot of teams have done throughout the league, sometimes your most competitive snaps and most competitive reps occur during the course of the week. Maybe you handle the game a little bit differently."

Texans rookie C.J. Stroud is the only starting quarterback who has taken any snaps in the three NFL preseason games already played. Stroud, the No. 2 overall pick, threw one interception in four pass attempts. No. 1 pick Bryce Young will start for the Carolina Panthers against the New York Jets on Saturday.

Aaron Rodgers hasn't played a down in the preseason since 2018. Justin Herbert has never played in an exhibition game.

The Jets and Panthers faced each other in practice this week ahead of their game. The Jets will do it again next week with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Rodgers will likely get all of his preseason work with his new team in New York's joint practices.

"I'm a big fan of the scrimmages because you get to work against new schemes," Jets coach Robert Saleh said. "You get to work against new verbiage. You get to work against different humans, obviously in a respectful way, but you go in there, you compete under a controlled environment, so you're not trying to make things up. We're not trying to scheme against them. We're still installing our stuff. You're just getting to do it against a different person and a different way of doing things, a different scheme. We're just trying to continue to get better, to be honest with you."

Buccaneers veteran QB Baker Mayfield will start Friday night's preseason game against the Pittsburgh Steelers. Mayfield is competing with Kyle Trask for the starting job. Tom Brady played a few series in the preseason during his three seasons in Tampa Bay.

Two-time Super Bowl MVP Patrick Mahomes will play the first quarter in Kansas City's preseason opener on Sunday. Matthew Stafford didn't play in any exhibition games in his first two seasons with the Los Angeles Rams.

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Angeles Rams. The Rams will hold scrimmages with the Las Vegas Raiders and Denver Broncos over the next two weeks.

"I think as a competitor you always want to play, but at the same time, I totally understand the choice not to," Stafford said. "Especially with the amount of experiences I've had in this league, I feel like I can get myself ready to play without doing that. And with the addition of all the joint practices that teams are doing, you really get some great work in there while being able to keep in somewhat of a safe environment."

The New York Giants and Detroit Lions practiced together this week leading into Friday night's game. Staying healthy while getting productive work is a priority.

"You have a bunch of competitive people that are hitting each other every day but we are going to try and take care of one another, keep people off the ground, stay away from the quarterback," Giants coach Brian Daboll said. "Just practice the right way like you are practicing against your team but again the competitive juices flow but do a good job of respecting them and look forward to that in return."

Players enjoy facing a different opponent. Coaches see more value in evaluating them.

"I want to see now that we're getting new competition, a different kind of competition, some damn good players over there on both sides of the ball, can you focus in on the little details, or are you going to go rogue on us, or start playing rap ball? Just trying to make plays and now you're out of position, and it costs us," Lions coach Dan Campbell said. "Those are the things I am looking for."

Only Buffalo, Pittsburgh, defending Super Bowl champion Kansas City, Dallas and Seattle aren't participating in joint practices.

"I think we control practice better the way we do it," Seahawks coach Pete Carroll said. "Look how hard we were running against each other the other day. More than that, we cherish the preseason games. We use the preseason games. I've done those practices before, but we feel like we can keep our focus and stay within the stuff we need to do."

## **DeSantis is resetting his campaign again. Some Republicans worry his message is getting in the way**

By STEVE PEOPLES, THOMAS BEAUMONT and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

CORALVILLE, Iowa (AP) — Ron DeSantis largely dismissed his own decision to replace his campaign leadership team as he returned to Iowa in the midst of a weeklong reset. The Republican presidential hopeful also made no mention of the two rounds of campaign layoffs he made recently in response to unexpected fundraising troubles.

Instead, the Florida governor on Thursday leaned into his central message — a self-described "war on woke" — and flashed a big smile as he courted an audience of roughly 200 cheering Republicans gathered at a family restaurant for the first of four scheduled stops on his latest bus tour through the first-in-the-nation caucus state.

"We're clicking. We're doing well," DeSantis told reporters after a fiery speech, dismissing questions about the turmoil that has plagued his White House bid in recent weeks. He said the average voter is far more focused on his plans for the country than his campaign leadership. "This process stuff, I think, is way overblown."

Whether DeSantis acknowledges his challenges or not, they have not gone away.

Five months before the first votes are cast in Iowa's opening presidential contest, a growing chorus of would-be supporters within his own party is questioning DeSantis' core message and political instincts amid a prolonged effort to stabilize his campaign that has involved three significant personnel decisions so far — the two rounds of cuts and replacement of the campaign manager. At the same time, new signs of tension have emerged between DeSantis' formal campaign and an allied super PAC that's now planning to dramatically increase spending on paid advertising to help make up for DeSantis' financial challenges.

"It remains to be seen whether or not he can save his campaign. He's not run a particularly effective one to date, obviously," said Eric Levine, a New York-based Republican donor who has been calling for the GOP to unify behind an alternative to former President Donald Trump. "He needs to be able to speak to

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a broader range of issues than the culture wars. To me, that is fundamentally at the core of his problem.”

That message still resonates with many Iowa Republicans, who frequently mention DeSantis as one of their top two or three picks heading into the caucus. But most successful campaigns require steady leadership and donors who are willing to stick out the tough moments — and that’s where DeSantis appears vulnerable.

After cutting one-third of his staff last month, DeSantis this week replaced campaign manager Generra Peck with James Uthmeier, his chief of staff in the Florida governor’s office. Uthmeier, who has never managed a campaign, was a central figure in some of DeSantis’ most controversial moves as governor, including the decision to fly migrants from Texas to an island off the Massachusetts coast last year.

As part of the leadership overhaul, DeSantis tapped veteran political operative David Polyansky, a senior adviser to his allied Never Back Down super PAC, to serve as deputy campaign manager. Some close to DeSantis’ operation believe that while Uthmeier has the campaign manager title and DeSantis’ trust, Polyansky will be effectively running the campaign given his extensive experience in presidential politics, especially in Iowa.

While DeSantis shrugs off his challenges, his allies are aware that multiple rounds of staffing cuts and stagnant polling numbers are undermining the campaign’s central message that DeSantis is better positioned than Trump to defeat President Joe Biden next fall.

Still, the DeSantis campaign tried to project optimism in a memo shared with campaign supporters and donors earlier in the week and obtained by The Associated Press.

“During the last few weeks, we have seen great success as a result of the changes we have made to run an insurgent campaign focused on the early nominating states,” the memo says, highlighting an increased reliance on interviews with mainstream media to spread his message and a new focus on smaller, more intimate events organized by the super PAC at no cost to the campaign.

In adopting the new strategy, DeSantis is testing the limits of federal laws that prohibit direct coordination between campaigns and super PACs by leaning more heavily on the Never Back Down super PAC, which can raise and spend unlimited sums of money — unlike the campaign, which is bound by strict fundraising limits.

Never Back Down has effectively adopted the role of candidate travel organizer, having chauffeured him, his wife and his children by bus to roughly 20 Iowa events over the past month, including this weekend’s three-day trip. Technically, DeSantis is only a guest of the super PAC, which is paying for the transportation and setup costs.

In another shift, the super PAC is increasing its Iowa advertising investment, which was never the super PAC’s primary function, in direct response to the campaign’s cash crunch. Reports of ad purchases in Iowa for the coming weeks show the super PAC tripling its spending in the state.

DeSantis’ increasing reliance on the super PAC comes as Never Back Down faces the prospect of financial trouble of its own. The organization’s biggest individual donor, hotel entrepreneur Robert Bigelow, told Reuters last week that he would not donate any more money unless the Florida governor attracts new major donors and adopts a more moderate approach.

“Extremism isn’t going to get you elected,” Bigelow said.

Billionaire hedge fund manager Ken Griffin, who told Politico last year that he was ready to back DeSantis if he ran for president, has not met with DeSantis or donated to his campaign since its May launch, according to a person familiar with his thinking who spoke on the condition of anonymity to disclose private deliberations.

Griffin has been unsettled by DeSantis’ policies about teaching gender and sexuality in Florida schools and his ongoing fight with Disney, according to the person. The Republican megadonor is also concerned that DeSantis has been pursuing policies that undermine individual rights and liberties.

Griffin declined to comment on any particular campaign, but said in a statement that he was “assessing how the policies of each candidate will strengthen our democracy.”

Meanwhile, DeSantis is showing no interest in backing off his focus on culture wars, which are popular with the GOP’s most passionate voters and remained a central focus of his stump speech this week in Iowa.



Speaking to reporters on Thursday, he said he gets a lot of questions about culture and made a direct connection between cultural issues and the economy. Specifically, he pointed to his opposition to ESG — or environmental, social and governance investments that are guided by corporations' policies.

"That is taking an ideological agenda and using the economy to try to advance it," DeSantis said. "That's bad because those policies are things that most Iowans don't support and that I don't support."

DeSantis allies are also divided about his primary strategy.

The super PAC continues to stress its commitment to winning or finishing a close second in the first three states — Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina — while they spend big to build out a pro-DeSantis political organization in several of the so-called Super Tuesday states that vote on March 5. Yet DeSantis' campaign has shifted sharply toward Iowa in recent weeks.

By the end of Friday, DeSantis will have appeared at more than two dozen events in Iowa since mid-July. That's compared to just two events in New Hampshire and South Carolina over the same period.

On Thursday, DeSantis noted that he was touching down in his 31st Iowa county and promised to campaign in all 99 on Iowa's sprawling checkerboard before the state's Jan. 15 presidential caucuses. But when asked, he avoided predicting a clear victory over Trump, who is the early heavy favorite.

"What you have to do is you have to win a majority of the delegates, you know," DeSantis told reporters after a brief stop in Cedar County's Tipton Family Restaurant. In Iowa, he added, "I think we're ahead of where we thought we would be, thus far."

## Insurers won't cover new Alzheimer's treatment for some customers

By TOM MURPHY AP Health Writer

Some private insurers are balking at paying for the first drug fully approved to slow mental decline in Alzheimer's patients.

Insurers selling coverage in North Carolina, Pennsylvania and New York, among other states, told The Associated Press they won't cover Leqembi with insurance offered on the individual market and through employers because they still see the \$26,000-a-year drug as experimental.

Their decision stands in contrast to Medicare, which will wind up covering most patients who take the drug. The federal coverage program mainly for people ages 65 and older announced shortly after Leqembi received full approval last month that it will cover the treatment while still tracking its safety and effectiveness.

Leqembi is the first medicine that's been convincingly shown to slow the cognitive decline caused by Alzheimer's disease, though only modestly. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the IV drug for patients with mild dementia and other symptoms caused by early Alzheimer's.

That approval came after regulators reviewed data from a large study in which the drug slowed memory and thinking decline by about five months in those who got the treatment compared with those who got a dummy drug. Some Alzheimer's experts say the delay is likely too subtle for patients or their families to notice.

Alzheimer's mainly affects the elderly. About 76% of the people taking Leqembi will be covered by Medicare, according to the Japanese drugmaker Eisai, which developed the drug and is co-marketing it with Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Biogen Inc.

But people under 65 — even, rarely, as young as their 30s — also can get diagnosed. They are more likely to have commercial coverage.

"That's why we're just dumbfounded that commercial plans are not covering it," said Christine Mann, chief operating officer of the Buffalo, N.Y.-area Dent Neurologic Institute, which will provide the IV drug to patients. "It's almost like discrimination against these patients."

The full picture on commercial insurance is still emerging in the patchwork U.S. system of coverage.

Companies saying no so far include Highmark, which provides Blue Cross and Blue Shield coverage in New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware and West Virginia; Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, which

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has about 1.8 million commercial customers; and Philadelphia-based Independence Blue Cross.

Highmark and the North Carolina plan say they are still monitoring Leqembi and could re-evaluate their decision.

Independence Blue Cross made its decision after reviewing published, peer-reviewed studies and publicly available FDA materials.

"That re-evaluation made it clear to us that the existing evidence does not allow for conclusions to be drawn about the safety and effectiveness of Leqembi," said Dr. Heidi Syropoulos, a medical director with the insurer.

A Highmark spokesman said that company made its decision after also consulting with specialists to determine if the drug's benefit outweighs its side effects, which include brain bleeding and swelling.

Prominent insurers that will cover the drug for commercial plans include Kaiser Permanente and Elevance Health, the largest provider of Blue Cross-Blue Shield plans in the United States. A spokesman for another big health insurer, UnitedHealthcare, declined to comment when contacted by AP.

Because Medicare covers the drug, patients with privately run Medicare Advantage plans will receive coverage, said Juliette Cubanski, of the non-profit KFF, which researches health care issues.

Many other insurers say they have yet to make a decision.

Most insurers will probably cover the drug but heavily restrict its use through things like requiring pre-approval, said Greg Warren, a health actuary and member of the Society of Actuaries.

For commercial coverage, insurers often pay for treatments that have full FDA approval. But that is not guaranteed.

Tufts Medical Center in Boston maintain a database that includes more than 11,000 commercial insurance coverage decisions on specialty drugs. In 2% of the decisions, insurers did not cover the FDA-approved use, said researcher James Chambers.

Chambers said they have found that the decision to not cover a drug largely happens when the evidence supporting the drug is considered questionable.

The denials for Leqembi don't surprise Jack Hoadley, a health policy researcher with Georgetown University's Center on Health Insurance Reforms.

He noted Leqembi's serious side effects and high cost. The price doesn't include the cost for repeated brain scans patients need to check for side effects.

But Hoadley said insurers also may have a hard time explaining themselves.

"It's going to be a harder-to-justify decision for them if they know that Medicare has made a decision to cover it," he said.

Patients who don't get coverage through a commercial plan may eventually receive it through Medicare or state- and federally funded Medicaid programs.

But waiting is risky. Those who advance out of early-stage Alzheimer's may no longer qualify for Leqembi.

Bonnie Bortz has been caring for her 38-year-old daughter, Jaime, who has early-onset Alzheimer's like her father did.

Bortz, who lives in the Buffalo suburb of Cheektowaga, is confident Jaime will get help paying for Leqembi because she will soon start on Medicare, which is available to some people under 65 with Alzheimer's. Still, that hasn't happened yet, and Bortz is anxious for treatment to begin.

She's watched Jaime progress from repeatedly losing her phone and keys to struggling to help her 7-year-old daughter with homework.

"I don't want to get to the next stages of all this," Bonnie Bortz said. "I want more time."

## More evacuations considered in Norway where the level in swollen rivers continues to rise

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Authorities were on standby to evacuate more people in southeastern Norway Friday, where huge amounts of water, littered with broken trees, debris and trash, were thundering down the usually serene rivers after days of torrential rain.

The level of water in swollen rivers and lakes continued to grow despite two days of dry but overcast weather, with houses abandoned in flooded areas, floating hay bales wrapped in white plastic, cars coated in mud and camping sites swamped.

In the Bagdammen lake, a helicopter with a net and cables attached was used to push a caravan toward the shore where it was pulled in by firefighters.

One of the most affected places was the town of Hoenefossen where the Begna river had gone over its banks and authorities were considering moving more people downstream for fear of landslides. A total of 3,600 people are estimated to have been already evacuated, the Norwegian news agency NTB said.

"We constantly try to think a few steps ahead. We are ready to press an even bigger red button," Magnus Nilholm, a local emergency manager in the Hoenefossen region, told Norwegian broadcaster NRK.

"This has been like a disaster movie," Solveig Vestenfor, the mayor of Aal municipality that has been affected by the floods, told NRK.

Ivar Berthling of Norway's Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE) told NTB that the water levels around Hoenefossen, some 40 kilometers (25 miles) north of Oslo, were expected to continue rising and remain high until at least Monday. Up north, near the Strondafjorden lake, the water level was reported to be 2.5 meters (8.2 feet) above normal.

"We are still facing critical days," the Ringerike municipality, where Hoenefossen lies, said in a statement.

"Being evacuated is a dramatic event in everyday life, especially for children," Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said as he visited one of the affected areas Friday.

Norway's 86-year-old King Harald V was given a briefing at the NVE headquarters, west of Oslo, on Friday, while his wife, Queen Sonja, was seen scribing on a notepad. The aging king who uses crutches, later met with volunteers who have worked with those evacuated.

"This was really extreme," Harald told reporters.

His wife added, "I think we have to wait a few days and see, before we can breathe a sigh of relief."

Authorities did not provide a nationwide count of evacuees. According to a rough estimate, damage so far could amount to 1 billion kroner (nearly \$100 million).

Authorities on Friday urged people not to check on their cabins in the devastated part of the country.

"Hytte," the Norwegian word for cabin, is part of the Scandinavian country's outdoors lifestyle, and thousands of Norwegians have access to a cabin — some in the mountains, others by the coast — that they use as a retreat from everyday life.

"We fully understand that many cabin owners are anxious about the cabin's condition after the ravages of the extreme weather, but we hope people will abstain now from making the trip just to check," Lars Aune of the National Police said in a statement. "This is to avoid unnecessary strain on exposed roads."

Storm Hans on Monday and Tuesday battered northern Europe, leading to transportation disruption, flooding and power cuts across the Nordic and Baltic region. At least three people were killed.

Southeastern Norway was particularly badly affected. A hydroelectric river dam collapsed Wednesday as water forced its way through, and earlier this week a train derailed in neighboring Sweden when a railway embankment was washed away by floods.

## **Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin says he's been thinking seriously about becoming an independent**

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin said that he has been thinking “seriously” about leaving the Democratic Party and becoming an independent.

The West Virginia lawmaker, who has raised his national profile as a swing vote on major spending packages in the closely divided U.S. Senate, made the comments on MetroNews “Talkline” on Thursday.

“I would think very seriously about that. I’ve been thinking about that for quite some time. I haven’t made any decisions whatsoever on any of my political direction,” Manchin said. “I want to make sure my voice is truly an independent voice, when I’m speaking I’m speaking about the good the Republicans do and the good the Democrats continue to do.”

Manchin hasn’t officially announced whether he will run for reelection, but two Republicans, Gov. Jim Justice and Rep. Alex Mooney, have already announced their candidacies for his Senate seat. The senator had recruited Justice to run for governor as a Democrat before Justice switched to the GOP at a rally for former President Donald Trump during his first term.

The comments from Manchin on Thursday are the most serious he’s made about a possible switch to independent.

“For me, I have to have peace of mind basically,” he said. “The brand has become so bad. The ‘D’ brand and ‘R’ brand. In West Virginia, the ‘D’ brand because it’s nationally bad. It’s not the Democrats in West Virginia. It’s the Democrats in Washington or the Washington policies of the Democrats. You’ve heard me say a million times that I’m not a Washington Democrat.”

In the Democratic caucus, his colleagues over the past few years have grown weary of Manchin, whose vote is one of two they cannot live without in a 51-49 Senate — but whose nearly constant chides at many in party, particularly Democratic President Joe Biden has left them concerned that he could switch parties and take away their slim hold on power.

One of his most stunning rebukes of his party came in December 2021 when after months of painstaking negotiations directly with the White House, Manchin pulled his support from a \$2 trillion social and environment bill, dealing a fatal blow to Biden’s leading domestic initiative in his first year in office.

Months later, in a shocking turn of events, Manchin and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer crafted a compromise package to ultimately pass and sign into law a modest domestic bill focused on healthcare and combating climate change.

## **EPA weighs formal review of vinyl chloride, the toxic chemical that burned in Ohio train derailment**

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration says it could soon launch a formal evaluation of risks posed by vinyl chloride, the cancer-causing chemical that burned in a towering plume of toxic black smoke following the fiery train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio.

The Environmental Protection Agency is set to review risks posed by a handful of chemicals later this year, and is considering chemicals used for plastic production as a key benchmark. Vinyl chloride is among a range of chemicals eligible for review, and “EPA could begin a risk evaluation on vinyl chloride in the near future,” the agency said in a statement to The Associated Press.

If selected, EPA would study vinyl chloride to determine whether it poses an “unreasonable risk to human health or the environment,” a process that would take at least three years.

Environmental and public health activists cheered the development, saying EPA should have banned vinyl chloride years ago.

“If one positive thing can come out of the toxic train derailment in East Palestine — and I would argue nothing positive has come out of it so far — it is for the Biden administration to use their existing legal authority to start the process to ban vinyl chloride,” said Judith Enck, a former regional EPA administrator



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and president of Beyond Plastics, an advocacy group that seeks to end plastic pollution.

"That accident was a chilling warning that we must act now to ban petrochemicals like vinyl chloride, and keep communities safe from known carcinogens," added Heather McTeer Toney, another former regional EPA administrator who leads a separate group called Beyond Petrochemicals.

Vinyl chloride is a flammable gas used to make polyvinyl chloride plastic, better known as PVC. The chemical is found in plastic PVC pipes, as well as vinyl siding, packaging and a range of consumer goods, including furniture, car parts, shower curtains and toys used by children and pets.

Inhalation of vinyl chloride has been linked to liver cancer and other health problems, according to the National Cancer Institute, and its use has long been banned in cosmetics, hair spray and other personal products. PVC plastic is not a known or suspected carcinogen, the agency said.

The Vinyl Institute, a trade group that represents manufacturers, called the effort to ban vinyl chloride misguided.

A July 27 news conference at EPA headquarters, attended by Enck, Toney and other activists, was little more than a "publicity stunt that irresponsibly ignores decades of credible science" showing that vinyl chloride is "safely and responsibly manufactured in the United States," Ned Monroe, president and CEO of the Vinyl Institute, said in a statement.

"Regrettably, Beyond Plastics has chosen to use the tragic events of East Palestine to advance deceptive and disproven claims about our industry that only serve to mislead the public," Monroe added.

Vinyl chloride monomer is an intermediary chemical found in PVC products used every day, Monroe said, "including PVC pipes that deliver clean drinking water, vinyl windows, siding for energy-efficient homes and lifesaving medical products like IV blood bags."

Debate over vinyl chloride has simmered for years, but gained a new urgency after the Feb. 3 derailment of a 50-car Norfolk Southern freight train in East Palestine. Three days later, emergency crews released toxic vinyl chloride from five tank cars and burned it to keep them from exploding.

That sent a billowing plume of black smoke over the town near the Pennsylvania border and prompted the evacuation of about half of its 5,000 residents. Months later, residents are concerned about lingering impacts on health, even though state and federal officials say tests show the town's air and water are safe.

Since an evacuation order was lifted near the derailment site, vinyl chloride has not been found in the community at or above an intermediate screening level, the EPA said. The intermediate level represents an estimate of exposure to a contaminant that is not expected to cause non-cancer health effects over a period of at least 15 days.

Jessica Conard, an East Palestine resident who lives near the crash site, called the Ohio train derailment "a very grim warning." The crash demonstrates that the rail industry "values profit over human lives and the environment," while state and federal regulators "failed to keep the industry in check," she said.

Conard faulted what she called "an insatiable demand" by Americans for plastic products that has "driven the need for increased transport of these hazardous substances, placing communities like mine at risk every single day."

Conard and other activists delivered more than 27,500 signatures to the EPA urging a ban on vinyl chloride.

"We're here today for one reason and one reason only: to tell the EPA that it's time now. We can't wait to ban vinyl chloride. We can't slow-walk this," said Daniel Winston, co-executive director of River Valley Organizing, a community group in eastern Ohio.

Winston, who lives 17 miles from the derailment site, said the controlled burn, conducted just three days after the derailment, allowed Norfolk Southern to quickly reopen the tracks "so they could get their profits back up. And now a community and the surrounding area is affected by this in a way that people are still getting sick today."

The Feb. 6 burn sparked worries that it could have formed dioxins, a known carcinogen created from burning chlorinated carbon materials.

"Vinyl chloride is bad, dioxins are worse as carcinogens and that comes from burning," said Neil Donahue, a chemistry professor at Carnegie Mellon University.

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Dioxins are a group of persistent environmental pollutants that last in the ground and body for years and have been one of the major environmental problems and controversies in the United States.

EPA ordered testing for the highly toxic compounds after the derailment and said results so far suggest there's a low chance that dioxins were released following the derailment.

## Today in History: August 12, 520 die in Japan airlines crash

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Aug. 12, the 224th day of 2023. There are 141 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Aug. 12, 1953, the Soviet Union conducted a secret test of its first hydrogen bomb.

On this date:

In 1867, President Andrew Johnson sparked a move to impeach him as he defied Congress by suspending Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, with whom he had clashed over Reconstruction policies. (Johnson was acquitted by the Senate.)

In 1898, fighting in the Spanish-American War came to an end.

In 1909, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, home to the Indianapolis 500, first opened.

In 1944, during World War II, Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., eldest son of Joseph and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, was killed with his co-pilot when their explosives-laden Navy plane blew up over England.

In 1960, the first balloon communications satellite — the Echo 1 — was launched by the United States from Cape Canaveral.

In 1964, author Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, died in Canterbury, Kent, England at age 56.

In 1978, Pope Paul VI, who had died Aug. 6 at age 80, was buried in St. Peter's Basilica.

In 1981, IBM introduced its first personal computer, the model 5150, at a press conference in New York.

In 1985, the world's worst single-aircraft disaster occurred as a crippled Japan Airlines Boeing 747 on a domestic flight crashed into a mountain, killing 520 people. Four survived.

In 1994, in baseball's eighth work stoppage since 1972, players went on strike rather than allow team owners to limit their salaries.

In 2000, the Russian nuclear submarine Kursk and its 118-man crew were lost during naval exercises in the Barents Sea.

Ten years ago: James "Whitey" Bulger, the feared Boston mob boss who became one of the nation's most-wanted fugitives, was convicted in a string of 11 killings and dozens of other gangland crimes, many of them committed while he was said to be an FBI informant. (Bulger was sentenced to life; he was fatally beaten at a West Virginia prison in 2018, hours after being transferred from a facility in Florida.) U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder announced that the Department of Justice would no longer demand mandatory minimum sentences for many low-level, non-violent non-repeat drug offenders, a major policy change.

Five years ago: Fewer than two dozen white nationalists showed up for a rally near the White House, where thousands of counter-demonstrators had gathered to send a message that racism is unwelcome. A year after the violence at a rally of white supremacists and other extremists in Charlottesville, Virginia, the mother of Heather Heyer, the woman killed while protesting against that rally, visited the site of the attack and said the country's racial wounds had not healed. Brooks Koepka wins the PGA Championship in St. Louis; Tiger Woods finished second after a final-round score of 64. A NASA spacecraft, the Parker Solar Probe, lifted off on a mission intended to bring it within 3.8 million miles of the surface of the sun.

One year ago: Salman Rushdie, the author whose writing led to death threats from Iran in the 1980s, was attacked and stabbed in the neck by a man who rushed the stage as he was about to give a lecture in western New York. A vacationing Associated Press reporter witnessed the man confront Rushdie on stage at the Chautauqua Institution and begin stabbing him 10 to 15 times as he was being introduced. The polio virus has been found in New York City's wastewater in another sign that the disease, which hadn't been seen in the U.S. in a decade, was quietly spreading among unvaccinated people. A representative

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for actor Anne Heche said she was on life support after suffering a brain injury in a fiery crash a week earlier and she wasn't expected to survive. (Heche would be declared dead two days later.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor George Hamilton is 84. Actor Dana Ivey is 82. Actor Jennifer Warren is 82. Rock singer-musician Mark Knopfler (Dire Straits) is 74. Actor Jim Beaver is 73. Singer Kid Creole (of Kid Creole and the Coconuts) is 73. Jazz musician Pat Metheny is 69. Actor Sam J. Jones is 69. Actor Bruce Greenwood is 67. Country singer Danny Shirley is 67. Pop musician Roy Hay (Culture Club) is 62. Rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot is 60. Actor Peter Krause (KROW'-zuh) is 58. Actor Brent Sexton is 56. International Tennis Hall of Famer Pete Sampras is 52. Actor-comedian Michael Ian Black is 52. Actor Yvette Nicole Brown is 52. Actor Rebecca Gayheart is 52. Actor Casey Affleck is 48. Actor Maggie Lawson is 43. Actor Dominique Swain is 43. Actor Leah Pipes is 35. Actor Lakeith Stanfield is 32. NBA All-Star Khris Middleton is 32. Actor Cara Delevingne (DEHL'-eh-veen) is 31. Actor Imani Hakim is 30.